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A. C. Thomson
from his friend
Gertrude King

HIS COUSIN ADAIR

“Time but the impression stronger makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear.”

HIS COUSIN ADAIR

BY

GORDON ROY

AUTHOR OF

'FOR HER SAKE,' 'FOR BETTER FOR WORSE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

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HIS COUSIN ADAIR.

CHAPTER I.

“‘NEEVIE, neevie nick-nack,
Which hand will you tak’?’

“Come, Adair, you lazy thing, do be quick and guess. I am dying to hear all about it,”—and the girl danced about with her hands behind her back, while she half said, half sung the old Scotch children’s rhyme.

“If you are dying to know, the best plan would be to give me the letter at once, or to read it for yourself. It is not likely that there will be any secrets in it.”

“How did you know that it was a letter?”

"I saw Joe Scott some time ago meandering round the bend of the road, so it hardly required the spirit of prophecy to suppose that he was coming here, nor to guess that the letter is from Aunt Evelyn, or possibly from Isabel, though that is not likely. No other body ever writes to us except those persistently sanguine people who will send us wine circulars and share-lists. I wonder by this time that they have not given us up in despair; we are so very likely, are we not, to take shares in the Sheba Gold Reef Mining Company or the London Pure Milk Supply? That was the latest chance offered to us, was it not, of becoming millionaires?"

"I don't know, I am sure, but there is your letter. Never mind about the shares, but tell us what is in it. I wish you would sometimes get a little bit excited."

"I am quite ready to get excited if any one will show me just cause,"—and a quick gleam flashing and fading in the brown eyes seemed confirmation of the words; "but why

on earth should I be expected to get excited over a letter of Aunt Evelyn's? It will likely announce when they are coming, and will dear Adair see that this is done and that is done, and that this thing and the next is not forgotten, which means that dear Adair is to spend about a week overlooking maids who don't choose to take her orders, and at last find all her arrangements upset when Mrs Owen comes; but as dear Adair and the other poor things have really done the best they could, they will be rewarded with a gown or two of Isabel's that are not smart enough for Fanchette, or perhaps a hat, how much out of fashion such aborigines are not likely to know. I envy you, Aggie, if you can find food for excitement in that."

"Oh, Adair, it is not all so bad as that. It is a change at least—the only one we get, I am sure; and then there is always the fun of watching them."

"That is just what I hate," broke in Adair impetuously—"that watching of them, and the endless tattle over their doings and sayings.

If only we could let each other alone to go our own way! For myself, I confess I am filled with envy, malice, and all uncharitableness the whole time they are here. I am afraid some afternoon, when Isabel comes across to 'have a good talk with you girls,' and looks us up and down from head to foot, and spies out the increasing nakedness of the land from under her eyelids, while poor mother hovers about her, I shall break out and do something desperate; or when at seven o'clock I am bidden to come to dinner at eight, because no one else can make old Lady Teesdale hear, and she gets fretful unless there is some one to speak to her. Oh, dear me! I am afraid I have it in me to be very wicked, and that fine impassive stare of Isabel's seems to quicken all the naughty little seedlings. I wonder if Lazarus took his crumbs always with perfect meekness and humility, and never listened with satisfaction to tales of Dives's meanness and greediness, or found it salve to his own sores to see how fat and gouty the great man was becoming as he

hobbled out to his chariot? I suppose not, judging from his final destiny. Perhaps if I were fairly on the Lazarus level, I could behave prettily to my betters too; but it comes harder on poor unfortunates like us, hung up between two worlds like Moham-med's coffin, and belonging to neither."

"Bettters, indeed! How can you talk like that, Adair? I wonder who is excited now. Are we not Earlstouns too, and just as good as they?"

"We are Earlstouns sure enough, and much good may it do us; but I am afraid most people would think there was a considerable difference between the Earlstouns of Earlshope and the Earlstouns whose uncle gives them the Old Manse to live in—a fact which is not very carefully hidden, for why be charitable and not get the credit for it? But perhaps we ought to consider Aunt Evelyn's side a little more. It must be a decided nuisance to have a colony of palpably poor relations planted at your very gates. Mordecai's presence spoiled Haman's digestion often enough,

I have no doubt, and Aunt Evelyn likely finds it pretty hard to be compelled every now and then to ask some of those great girls to dinner—that's how she speaks of us, Aggie, 'poor Agnes and those three great girls of hers.' I wonder what constitutes a *great* girl, or what the special crime of being one is? I am a fair size, certainly, but neither you nor Elfie are specially ponderous."

"I wonder if I shall be asked to dinner this year?" said Agnes meditatively. "I am sure I am old enough now. It was not much good dressing one's self only to sit in the drawing-room for an hour after dinner. It is rather hard at my age to be treated as a mere school-girl like Clara,—and I don't even get half the attention that she does, she puts herself forward so."

"You are not angry at *me*, Adair, are you?" said a girl who had till now been silent. She was lying on the grass, her head on her sister's lap; but at the mention of her name she looked up into Adair's face, repeating in a voice that had a strangely

plaintive note in it, "You are not angry with me?"

"Angry with you, darling! Why should I be?"—the eager young voice falling at once from the fiery crescendo of indignation, partly real, partly assumed, to its usual tones.

"I thought you were scolding some one, and that it might be me."

"*I* would sound better, Elfie, dear," corrected the elder sister gravely. "So you thought I was scolding, did you? I was under the impression that I was confessing my faults, which is supposed to be a good moral exercise,"—a sparkle of fun kindling in her eyes; "but it is as well to know how one's conduct impresses an unprejudiced observer."

"But why did you say uncle was like Haman? Haman was a bad man; he was hanged."

"Oh, rubbish, Elfie!" broke in Agnes impatiently; "why don't you listen when people are talking, instead of asking such absurd questions afterwards? You have no idea how

silly it makes you seem ; you should remember you are not a child now."

Elfie looked at Agnes and then back at Adair, a look of vague wistful appeal in her eyes, like a child, or even more like some dumb creature chidden for a fault it does not understand. Adair shot an ireful glance at her sister.

"Never mind what I was saying, Elfie, dear," she said, gently stroking the long slim hand that lay on her knee. "I was only talking nonsense, as your silly old sister often does."

"The letter, the letter, Adair ! Have you forgotten all about it ? I shall have to read it myself after all."

"Oh, to be sure, the letter. What would Aunt Evelyn think if she knew it had been allowed to lie unopened all this time ?" said Adair, with a laugh, picking up the thick square of faintly scented vellum-like paper, on which the device borne by grim old Border warriors, a hawk on the pounce, with the motto, "*I dare*," seemed somewhat out of

place. She hastily glanced it over. "Pretty much what I expected," she said, tossing it lightly to her sister. "A few more commands or requests, whichever you please to call them, 'as we are to be such a large party'—'coming earlier on account of Sir Claud Maxwell's proposed candidature for Muirshiels.'"

"Sir Claud Maxwell!" said Agnes, in a tone which suggested that had she been a man the exclamation would have been replaced by a whistle. "So that is Isabel's latest, I suppose."

"Who may he be?" asked Adair indifferently.

"Oh, Adair, you must know. He, or I think it was his father, bought that great place, Middleton, that has been empty so long. He is one of the old Maxwells, I believe, but his father, like a wise man, went into business and made his pile. He will come here because Earlshope is nearer Muirshiels, and of course he will need advice in furnishing that big empty house, and all the rest of it, and by the time Middleton is swept and garnished its

mistress will be prepared to take possession.
Voilà tout."

Adair laughed. "You are developing quite a talent for scheming, Aggie, though the parallel you suggest is not altogether flattering to the master of Middleton or its future mistress, whoever she may be."

"Why did you not tell me that Douglas is coming home?" said Agnes, suddenly looking up keenly at her sister.

"You did not give me time," said Adair, turning away her head a little. "You were so much taken up planning Sir Claud's affairs. If you give me the letter now, I shall take it to mother. I do wish Aunt Evelyn would write to her instead of to me, it always annoys her so. I must see after tea; I am hungry if no other one is." She rose with an abrupt little laugh that ended in a sigh, and putting her hands behind her head, and stretching up her tall figure, she stood for a moment or two leaning against the mossy trunk of the old apple-tree under which she had been sitting.

“You will get your dress all green off that tree,” remarked Agnes prudently.

“I will come with you too,” said Elfie, rising and slipping her arm through her sister’s.

The yellow sunlight of the late July afternoon was pouring in a broken flood of brightness through the twisted branches and scanty foliage of the old trees on the two young faces, which contrasted sharply enough with each other, and yet were curiously alike underneath the surface difference. Standing together, Elfie unconsciously leaning against her sister, they might have served as types of morning and twilight—a morning that might foretell a changeful day, bursts of storm and of brightness; an evening gently fading away into deepening shadows. Adair was tall, with a firm, erect, rounded figure, long-limbed and deep-chested, telling of perfect health and activity, and of warm quick young blood. So did the strong little white teeth disclosed by the red quiver-shaped lips, and the abundant hair, not perhaps over fine in texture, but

waving back from the broad brow, and breaking out into one or two rebellious little curls round the white nape, from which it was swept up into a thick coil that crowned her head. In colour it was a red-brown, but at this moment, sun-smitten and ruffled by the wind, more red than brown. "Adair's colouring is all in her hair," Agnes had said once with a little self-satisfied laugh—and it was true enough, though by no means meant as a compliment, for Adair had the smooth clear skin which often accompanies her shade of hair, and which, though colourless, can hardly, in its warm living whiteness, be called pale. It was not very often, however, that Adair could be called pale. Excitement, indignation, or admiration would bring the blood to her cheeks, and waken the fiery little sparkle in the brown eyes, which, when her feelings were stirred, seemed in their glowing depths to vie with the ruddy splendour of her hair—an enkindling of her whole being, as it were, almost startling at first in its suddenness to those who did not know her,

nor understand the temperament that such a physique suggests,—the sudden impulses, the hot temper, quick anger and swift repentance, that needed all the curb of the strong will implied by the firmly moulded chin.

Elfie resembled her sister as a plant grown blanced and feeble in the shade may resemble another of the same species flourishing in the full sunlight, and drawing its vigorous life from wind and rain and the kindly earth alike. Though not so tall as her sister, she seemed so from her extreme slightness. Her features were not unlike Adair's, save that the chin was narrow and pointed instead of somewhat square in outline, while the shortness of the upper lip and the slight dilation of the delicate nostrils gave an air of lassitude to her face only too well borne out by the slender falling shoulders and the drooping lines of her whole figure. Her hair, plentiful as Adair's but lacking all its brightness, was a peculiar dull shade of brown—"mouse-brown" the country people called it—and fell soft and heavy round her neck and shoulders.

Agnes, the second sister, was a wholly different type,—little and dainty in figure, with that pink-and-white colouring which, with small straight features, passes in girlhood for prettiness. By the country-side generally Miss Agnes was considered the “flower of the flock,” a fact of which that little person was tolerably well aware, as may be supposed. Elfie, with her wistful, abstracted air, was called a “puir dwining-like thing”; while the highest encomium usually bestowed upon Adair by the shepherds and ploughmen when she passed them, with her firm light step and stately height so well carried, was, “a fine strappin’ lass yon.” Her fine development and look of perfect health made much less impression upon them than her sister’s porcelain prettiness. Fashions in thought as well as in dress descend from one rank to another, and may be found flourishing in lowly spheres long after they have disappeared from the higher; so the anæmic, helpless, hothouse type of ladyhood was still the accepted ideal of those sturdy

Scotch folk, perhaps from very contrast with their own robust womankind. The women thought "Miss Adair would be a bonnie lass if she werena so red-heided—if only she had nice licht hair like Miss Agnes noo." In our grandmothers' days a reddish tinge in the hair was as fatal to any pretensions to beauty as a squint might have been. The golden-red locks of the sumptuous Venetian beauties which Titian loved to paint would in real life have been promptly stigmatised as carroty, and the few dwellers by the Rule Water to whom she was a familiar presence would probably have been much surprised had they been told there was anything to admire in Adair's warm-tinted coils. For herself, Adair thought as little of her appearance as was natural to any healthy-minded girl of her age. From her childhood she had been taught to regard Agnes as the beauty of the family, and ideas implanted then take a very deep hold, and are as little likely to be questioned as the truth of his creed is by the average orthodox believer, or some

settled literary reputation of the last century by that abstract personage "the general reader." On her part, Agnes accepted her honours very placidly, assumed all the little airs of a privileged person, and regarded any little adornments or elegancies of dress as only her due. The sisters wore alike the same light cotton dresses; but while the loose blouse bodices and somewhat scanty skirts of the others were rather suggestive of "unskilled labour" in the great art of dressmaking, Agnes's was carefully pinched in to her little figure, and her whole appearance, from the elaborate puffs and twists of her soft light hair down to her buckled shoes, had a thoroughly *soigné* aspect.

There was a little pause. Agnes, who was given to small industries, had produced some bit of work, and was fiddling away at it with an air of complacent diligence and absorption which might have been intended to convey a tacit reproof to Adair, leaning against the tree-trunk, her eyes fixed on the shining

ripples of the Rule Water, down to whose broad shallow waters the rough grass sloped. A stronger puff of the breeze that was strengthening as the sun went down brought a little green apple plumping down at her feet. Adair started and picked it up, tossing it and catching it like a ball. "Come, Elfie," she said, turning away; "you are infecting me—you are making me a dreamer of dreams like yourself."

From the fitful checkered light and shadow of the few hoary gnarled fruit-trees the girls emerged into the broad sunshine of the homely old-fashioned garden—one of those old country gardens that speak of long continuance and settled habitation, where hardy flowers and fruit and vegetables grow side by side, and each plant or bush has its own place sacred to itself, undisturbed by change or improvement. The air was full of the hum of bees, that most soothing and slumberous of sounds, busy in the great clumps of many coloured sweet-william or white and lilac phlox. As they passed up between the tall boxwood edging, reaching

almost to the knee, Adair half unconsciously pulled the leaves of the heavily scented balms or feathery pungent southernwood, grown almost to the size of bushes. Midway up the path an old man was leaning over his spade, contemplating some rows of cabbages with an air of mournful gravity.

"These are not going to do us much credit, I am afraid, Saunders," said Adair.

"Deed no, miss ; an' a' the time an' trouble I've gi'en to them. But it's aye the way—pettet bairns turn out a heartbreak," said the old man, turning round at the sound of her voice. His manner was perfectly respectful, but he never dreamt of removing, or even of touching, at sight of "the leddies," the old Glengarry bonnet, long ago shorn of its fluttering ribbons, and faded from its original Cameronian blue, like the rest of his attire, to that indescribable greenish-brownish hue, telling of long exposure to wind and weather. Indeed, looking at the knotted old hands curved round the spade-handle, it was almost impossible to imagine them detached from that long-familiar

implement of which they seemed to have grown a part, especially for what Saunders would have regarded as an altogether trifling and unnecessary action. Not but what he had the highest regard for "the Miss," as he invariably called Adair, tacitly excepting her from his strictures upon "they weemen,"—two words which one had but to hear him pronounce to gather that his opinion of the fair sex was by no means a flattering one. He would even admit that she had "some glimmerins o' what a gairden needed," and that she was "awfu' sensible for so young a cratur." In employing that now widely used word, Saunders must not be suspected of having adopted even one word of our modern *argot*. Long before such singular conjunctions of words as "awfully jolly" or "awfully pretty" had become too common for any one to question them, the word had been current in Scotland even in regard to such solemn subjects as kirks and sermons; and a douce elder would gravely say that "the minister had been awfu' stirrin' the day."

“I thought you had deserted us altogether, Saunders.”

“Weel, miss, ye see there’s been a heap o’ details this week. I’ve been rale complicate in my circumstances. Mrs Mackay, puir body, canna see that there’s times an’ seasons, an’ that the husbandman must wait long for the precious fruits of the earth. Odd, I believe if the woman had her way o’t, she’d be for pittin’ the potatoes e’enoo,” the frosty old blue eyes twinkling with wrathful contempt. Saunders was beadle or minister’s man of the little church further down the glen at Rule Waterfoot—an office which has produced a race of men peculiar to itself, and which is pretty certain to bring any latent conceit or oddity to the surface. Perhaps from some sense of the dignity of his office, Saunders made use of a quasi-Scriptural phraseology interlarded with any long word that chanced to take his fancy, evidently regarding polysyllables as the candid old Scotchwoman admitted that she did swearing, as “a great offset to the conversation.” His time was chiefly occupied in attend-

ing to the manse garden and doing odd jobs about the glebe, and the hours he devoted to the garden at the Old Manse formed a standing subject of feud between him and his legitimate mistress, as she at least considered herself, Mrs Mackay.

“Ay, we’ll hae to set them doon as mere cumberers o’ the grund,” he said ruefully, glancing again over the rows of cabbages, which seemed to have started with a wrong conception of their mission, and to be endeavouring to figure as foliage plants; “an’ it’s no’ for want o’ diggin’ aboot them an’ dungin’ them; an’ speakin’ o’ dung, Miss Adair,” facing round with sudden briskness, “I was ower at the Hoose the day, seein’ Mr Warnock at the gairdens——”

“You would hear that Mr and Mrs Earls-toun are coming soon,” said Adair hastily, with a not unreasonable desire to substitute any other topic for the one introduced by Saunders.

“Ay, there was some word o’t, an’ there’s a possibeelity o’ Maister Douglas coming too.”

“ Yes, I believe so.”

“ Aweel, I’m glad to hear it, an’ it’s high time, to ma humble thinkin’. What wi’ their English schools, an’ their English colleges, an’ their English kirks, the gentry are clean forgettin’ that they are kindly Scots a’ thegither. Noo that the ither puir laud’s gane, it’s but richt that Maister Douglas suld learn to ken the place that’s to be his ain some day. I wudna wuss to say ony ill o’ the depairted, but if Maister Douglas is still the laud he used to be, he’ll mak’ a better laird than the puir chap that’s awa’ — ay, or the ane we hae, for that maitter o’t. Deed, it’s high time somebody was lookin’ into things ower yonner, Miss Adair; an’ ye may tak’ ma word for’t, it’s naethin’ but fill and fetch mair, from Maister Warnock doon.”

“ I’ll come out after tea and see about that new bed we were speaking of, Saunders, if you have time to wait to-night. Have you had tea yourself? You had better go in and Mirren will get you some. Gardening is thirsty work this weather.”

“Hoot, I’m no needin’t—I didna come to sorn on ye; but aweel aweel, if ye insist, I’ll no’ say but I may come in by-and-by.” “An’ so Maister Douglas is coming back,” he said to himself, as he watched the girl go up the path and disappear through an arch in the high beech hedge, which it was his pride to keep smoothly clipped, and which shut off what Adair laughingly called “the company part” of the garden. “Weel, if the laud’s ony wuts, I ken what he’ll do, an’ I’m no like they clashin’ wives at the toon, that wad wed a laud an’ a lass afore they speak thegither. Deed, it’s little eneuch guid I hae seen come o’ mairryin’, or onything else the weemin hae to meddle wi’, but it’s likely it’ll be some Lunnon madam he’s wantin’,—his mither ’ll hae ane lookit oot for him by this time, nae doot;” and Saunders relieved his feelings by twitching up a particularly leafy cabbage and hurling it viciously on to the rubbish heap.

Beyond the beech hedge was a stretch of grass, cut up here and there into beds brilliant just now with the garish reds and blues

and yellows so dear to the gardener's soul, and which Saunders proudly declared to be equal to anything at "the Hoose," to him the highest standard of comparison. In the centre, under an old widespreading thorn-tree, was a wicker table and one or two garden-chairs, in one of which a lady was evidently enjoying a very comfortable afternoon nap. Adair came across the grass with swift, noiseless steps, stood watching her for a moment in silence, her face softening, and then went quickly on into the house—a long, low, white building, with two little narrow windows on each side of the door, and five of the same size in a row above. The flat front was relieved from utter bareness only by the creepers which Adair was assiduously training up the walls, and which now surrounded the lower windows with a frame of living green. They hid, in summer at least, the glaring monotony of the whitewash, though Mrs Earlstoun declared they made the house damper than it was, and Agnes complained

that they sheltered a whole entomological museum, and was for ever emitting little shrieks over some new specimen, which she averred would never have been seen had it not been for "those creepers."

CHAPTER II.

“THOSE creepers,” it had to be admitted, darkened the low-ceiled dining-room a good deal, for the house faced north, and the front was in deep shadow, though it was still high daylight without, and the sun on those long July days an hour or two yet from its setting. On the Rule Water, save at “the Hoose,” every one kept early hours, and tea was a very solid comfortable meal, to which every one sat down round the big dining-table. If the creepers darkened the room a little, they gave it, however, by way of compensation, almost its only touch of grace,—the tossing crowns of the honeysuckle, or the delicate waving tendrils of the Virginia creeper, framing such glimpses of the brightness without, as could

be seen through the small-paned, heavily sashed windows.

“The room is utterly hopeless with such a paper and those chairs; how would dabs of ribbon or bits of serge improve it, even if we had them?” Adair had said in answer to some suggestion of Agnes’s that they might try to brighten it up a little. Some faint ripples of the great wave of decorative art had reached even the Rule Water, and had produced a sudden eruption of china plates and peacock’s feathers, uncanny combinations of colours, and a resuscitation of weird articles of lumber, or of “virtue” as their owners called them, in the few sober, solid, little-used drawing-rooms the neighbourhood could boast.

“It would be worse than the contrast between Mrs Mackay’s art-curtains, as she calls them, and her botanic garden of a carpet, or her Japanese vases and that terrible trophy of wax pears and plums: it reminds me of nothing so much as old Jock Drysdale’s new chestnut wig stuck on the top of his wrinkles.”

But if the room with its sarcophagus-like sideboard and heavy chairs of dark Spanish mahogany, its flock paper with a preposterous drab-coloured pattern of scrolls and spirals sprawling over its woolly surface of dingy red, was hopelessly ugly, as Adair had said, the tea-table and the faces round it were a pleasanter sight—the old blue bowl filled with the Gloire de Dijon roses that grew so well on the sheltered southern side of the house, the snowy “scones” and golden-brown “pancakes,” appealing to more senses than one. Adair made tea, her mother having long ago resigned to her all active household functions. It was easy to see from whom Agnes had derived her Dresden-china prettiness. Mrs Earlstoun’s eyes were still as blue, her softly tinted complexion almost as fresh, as when years ago her peachy bloom had captivated young Charlie Earlstoun, newly home from a hill-station in India, where he had seen only swarthy native countenances, or the bleached jaded faces of the few Europeans.

He had considered himself a highly fortunate man when, after a week or two of hot wooing, he had carried off the belle of the garrison town. That he may have modified his opinion afterwards, when he found that his Dresden nymph had not much to give him beyond that pretty little coquettish smile which had fired his heart at first, but from which even the least exacting of men might crave some little variety, is not impossible. If satiety quickly followed satisfaction, both were soon over, for a year or two afterwards he fell in an obscure skirmish in the course of one of our costly "little wars." He left his widow and two little girls, to whom a third was added soon after the young father's death, dependent, save for a small pension, on his elder brother. No blue-eyed Greuze mourning over her *cruche cassée* or her pet bird looked half so pathetic as Mrs Charles in her widow's weeds, with Adair, already a sturdy independent little woman, toddling beside her, and little Agnes, the loveliest of animated wax-dolls, in her arms.

Mr Earlstoun, overcome—as what man would not have been?—by such a picture of beauty in distress, had at once installed her in her present abode, and had promised to do anything and everything for her and for “poor Charlie’s bairns.” The thought of Charlie in his far-away soldier’s grave brought back the old days of childhood and boyhood, when two curly-headed lads had never been separate, racing their rough ponies to school, sharing play or punishment, bathing, fishing in the Rule, bird-nesting together, and falling asleep at last cheek to cheek at night. Provide for Charlie’s children and his poor young wife, bonnie creature that she was, surely he would! But as time went on, and those early days and the tender awakening of memory were pushed further and further into the dim background of the past, Mr Earlstoun was not perhaps to be greatly blamed if the fulfilment was hardly equal to the first fervour of his promises. He was a soft-hearted man, but he had the claims of a great estate, his own children, above

all his wife, to counsel prudence, and what it might be mere selfishness to withhold for our own sake, becomes nothing less than duty when done for such claimants. Possibly, to a considerable extent, he had simply forgotten what he had once fully intended to do ; but his sister-in-law never forgot. She regarded what she received as only a tithe of her just rights, and assumed little airs of ill-usage, almost convincing even those who knew better, as probably she had done herself, that in some way or other the Laird of Earlshope had enriched himself at the expense of his dead brother's widow and children. Though nearly twenty years a widow, Mrs Charles always wore black, which enhanced as nothing else could her soft colouring ; and on her light hair, blanched a little, perhaps, but in which not a grey thread could be seen, a sort of modified widow's cap, a little Marie - Stuart - like white coif, to preserve which in perfect freshness and crispness cost Adair many an hour.

“So you have had a letter, Adair,” she said,

as soon as they were seated at table. "I think your aunt's conduct is quite pointed enough in always writing to you instead of, as would be only natural and proper, to me ; but it is rather too much that it should be left to Agnes to let me know that you had even received it."

"Mother," said Adair, setting down her cup, the hot colour flooding her face, "I came with it to you at once, but I thought, at least I hoped, you were resting, and did not wish to disturb you ; and then I was busy looking after Mirren."

"I never can understand why Mirren and all our maids should require so much 'looking after,' as you call it. In the days when I felt able to attend to my own house, I showed a girl her duty and then left her to do it, but, of course, you young people have your own ways. As to my resting, I am sure you might know by this time—I have told you often enough at least—that I never rest in the day-time," in a tone of mild acerbity. "Because I may close my eyes for a little, you need not

jump to the conclusion that I am sleeping." Like most people who indulge in the comfortable habit of an afternoon nap, Mrs Earlstoun hotly resented any suggestion that she had been found dozing.

"May I read you the letter now?"

"Oh, you need not trouble. I think Agnes has told me anything of interest that is in it."

"I am glad Douglas is coming back," put in Agnes. "I always liked him better than Maurice, poor fellow. It seems quite a long time now since he was here. You ought to remember, Adair, you and he were always chums. Maurice was always much too grand and grown up for us. It must be nearly five years ago, for I was quite a little girl then. I wonder if he will be much changed—as much changed as," with a little conscious laugh, "I am, for example."

"I hope he may not follow in his poor brother's steps," said Mrs Earlstoun, in a tone that suggested melancholy expectation rather than hope. "Such a lamentable end might have been a lesson to the whole family, but

they seem to have got very easily over it. Of course, they are perhaps wise enough to see that, after all, they may have been spared a good deal; he would likely have gone from bad to worse. I am afraid it is in the blood: their mother is a Daylesford, and that is a bad stock—every one knows what *they* are. Although your poor dear father was a soldier, the army is a bad school, I must say, for some young men at least. If I had been his mother, I could not have let Douglas remain in it an hour after poor Maurice's death, one never knows what may happen; but of course every one is not so anxious as I am. Mrs Earlstoun must take life very easily, or she could not have preserved her appearance as she has done. To be sure, she has none of the cares of poverty," with a little sigh.

"She does not look half so young nor so pretty as you do, mammy," said Agnes. "If only you would leave off these caps, you might pass for the second Miss Earlstoun any day."

"I hope I shall never so far forget my duty

to your poor dear father's memory, Agnes," said her mother reprovingly, though a little gratified smile at the well-worn compliment crossed her lips. "As for your aunt, I think it very unseemly for a woman of her age, with great grown-up sons and daughters, to affect the youthful style she does. I was really quite shocked to see her last year, with her bare neck and arms, and her hair dressed up over a cushion, as if she were twenty-five, like Isabel, instead of fifty, as she must be. If she only knew, I counted ever so many grey hairs."

"Oh, mother, Isabel cannot be twenty-five," said Adair, in a tone of protest.

"Are you or am I likely to know best, my dear? I am getting an old woman, I know, but I do not think my memory is failing me yet."

"Now, dear people, I want to talk about something a great deal more interesting than Isabel's age,—she may be thirty for all I care, I am sure she looks it,—and that is—clothes! If all these people are coming, we must have

something decent to wear. Now, mother, you will stand by me, for Adair is getting up her financial frown already; she will prove directly that there isn't a penny to spare, and that we must be content to appear in those old duds before Sir Claud, and Mr Dallas, and Lady Lorrimore, and all the rest of them. I am sure this old thing is fit for nothing but a duster," crumpling it up in her hands.

"Yes, Adair, I never thought you had been very successful with those gowns. I don't like that loose shapeless style, it makes you look stouter even than you are," said her mother, who, being little and slight herself, —fairy-like she had been called in her youth, —always looked with disfavour on her eldest daughter's more generous proportions.

"At least they did not cost much," said Adair, rather bluntly.

"Now, Adair, I don't see why I should be blamed for not wishing to appear like a sack tied round the middle, though you and Elfie evidently are content to do so. I am sure

Miss Jarvie at Muirshiels did not charge so very much for making it, and it looks so much better, you must admit," pressing two little hands against her round trim waist. "One thing I must and will have, and that is a new frock to wear in the evening,—white, I suppose, would be the best, and I could have some changes of colour to wear with it. Now, Adair, don't shake your head; you need not be in such a dreadful hurry to pay the butcher and the baker. We have to do without lots of things we would like, and I don't see why they shouldn't wait a little for their money for once. It would be a wholesome moral discipline for them, as Mr Mackay says. Say yes, mother—do! I have almost forgotten what it is like to have a decent new dress."

"Yes, I think you must all try to smarten yourselves up a little. One never knows what might happen," with a nod and a little smile. "For any sake, Elfie, child," in a sharper tone, "put back your hair; it will be in your cup directly. Really I think it is high time you were putting up your hair now, and trying to

make yourself look a little more like other people. You might do it for her, Adair, if she is too handless herself."

Elfie had been sitting silent, her eyes fixed on the waving tree-tops outside, golden-green in the evening sunlight. She started at the mention of her name, and looked up with a bewildered expression, vaguely conscious that she was being blamed for something.

"If it were fair hair it would be different," went on Mrs Earlstoun, as if the girl were not present, "but I am sure that dull brown mass hanging about her face is no ornament."

"Oh, don't trouble the child; there is plenty of time yet. I cannot imagine Elfie with her hair twisted up. It is so soft and fine, too—not like my ropes and cables," said Adair, rising. "If you don't mind, mother," with a little hesitation, "I think I shall go over to Earlshope. Aunt Evelyn wants a number of things done, and the sooner I see about them the better, for there is not much time."

The pretty pink colour grew brighter in Mrs Earlstoun's cheeks. "I wish you had

some proper pride, and that you would remember that you are an Adair as well as an Earlstoun," erecting her little head. "It is no wonder that your aunt regards you as a sort of upper servant when you are so ready to do her bidding."

"Do you think I like doing it, mother?" in a choked sort of voice.

"I am sure I don't know, but you have such an exaggerated idea of what we owe to your uncle. To be sure, he gives us this house to live in, but what is that, after all? Really I think that we do him a service, rather than he us, by living in this ramshackle old place and keeping it in some sort of order. Most people would think it little enough for a rich man to do for his only brother's widow and orphans, but evidently you regard it differently. If you are so ready to lay yourself at people's feet, you need not wonder that you are trampled upon, Adair. Oh, go, by all means—go! I wonder you go through the form of asking me. I thought we might have looked over your things to-night, and

have had a little talk over them, but that does not matter. I am getting used to being set aside."

Adair left the room hastily enough, a suspicious brightness in her eyes, and jerking a garden hat off its peg in the flagged hall, she went out into the clear still evening. A gate in the high ivy-covered wall opened on to the road that wound by the water-side up the glen. A few quick steps led her down to the Rule, crossed here by a rustic foot-bridge leading to the Earlshope woods on the other side; the state entrance, with its arched gates and fierce sculptured hawks, was farther down the glen. Midway on the bridge Adair paused, and leaning her arms on the broad rail, looked down into the clear hurrying waters, and then away up the long narrow glen, where, in the dip of the hills through which the Rule came down from the dark moorlands beyond, the sun had gone down in solemn cloudless midsummer pomp, leaving behind it a band of incandescent crimson, slowly burning away into the grey ashes of twilight. Late or

early, in haste or in leisure, the bridge, the swift waters, and that far-away western outlook, had a fascination for Adair. Rule Water-side might for the most part be described as Tweeddale was early in the century, "as a road, a water, and a hill," these for miles of its upper reaches summing up its natural features. Here, however, the pastoral hills that so closely and steeply hemmed in the stream fell back a little, leaving space for a broad belt of woodland, above which rose grey turrets and gables, and a forest of twisted chimneys, dimly seen against the plantations of fir and larch that broke the smooth sweep of the hillsides. Along the ridge the trees stood out in clear outline against the delicately illumined northern sky. From one of the many Earlshope chimneys a faint wreath of smoke was rising, and lying in a blue wisp across the dark fir-clothed slope. The birds were nearly all silent now—only a stray note from thrush or blackbird, with a distant bark from some shepherd's collie up on the hills, and the rumble of some heavy-laden cart far

away down the glen, broke the utter stillness and accentuated the evening hush. Other sound there was none, save the voice of the water. As Adair lingered, those cool clear waters seemed to flow over hot heart and brain, and to carry away the rankling sense of injustice, the pain of love repressed and thrown back upon itself, the revolt of a warm young heart against the petty pressure of daily life. There are few troubles that do not seem more endurable under a sunset sky; in the broad calm of a summer evening the tumult within dies down as silence deepens around. It is only when the earthquake shock of some crushing grief has shattered our individual world that the wide, unheeding, unknowing tranquillity of earth and sky becomes cruellest mockery instead of soothing balm. Why should she distress herself so? Mother did not mean all she said—it was only her way, Adair was able by-and-by, in young elasticity of spirit, to reason with herself. “Only her way,” three words as readily put forward in excuse by the owners of

those troublesome propensities thus euphoni-
ously characterised, as they are willingly ac-
cepted by the sufferers from them, but which
are perhaps the cause of more weary hearts
and shadowed lives than all wilful wrong-
doing. But after all, neither "mother's way,"
nor Aunt Evelyn, nor old gowns, nor all their
little frets and pinches, could take the colour
from the sky nor the familiar music from the
Rule. With her eyes fixed on the fading bar
of light, the girl's thoughts slipped away from
those only too familiar preoccupations to that
time which till to-day had seemed so far away
back, to that last summer Douglas had spent
at home, when—was it only fancy that always
brightens the past, or only because she was
older and more clear-sighted now?—the inter-
course between the cousins had seemed freer,
and there was less chafing consciousness of the
worldly difference between them. How clearly
it came back now, that day when Douglas
came to say good-bye, and, blushing like a
girl, to show his new uniform. They had all
walked back with him, and Adair, lingering on

the bridge, had found Douglas beside her. The laughing voices had died away in the darkening woods, and they two were alone with the sunset and the whispering waters. Then perhaps it was but that nameless melancholy that steals over even the least sensitive spirit—

“ On some fair eve,
When heaven and earth have grown too fair for mirth,”—

but the seventeen-year-old girl had awakened for the first time to vague yearnings, to dim stirrings, whether of pain or of pleasure she hardly knew. Not a word had been said, for somehow the old outspoken frankness of lifelong comradeship seemed impossible then. “ You won’t forget me, Adair,” Douglas had stammered at last, a flush and a brightness on the lad’s face that was not wholly due to the sunset. She had tried to say something, to make the half-jesting reply she might have uttered before, but no words had come; and then the others had come back, and there was a confusion of good-byes and good wishes, amid which two hands had lingered a little

longer in that last parting hand-clasp. That was nearly five years ago—no, she had not forgotten; and now he was coming back. Whatever formless visions might have been half unconsciously floating through the mind which Adair always declared to be eminently matter-of-fact—it was only her aunt's letter and injunctions that had made her think of Douglas, and naturally of those old days—they were suddenly dispelled by a hand being gently slipped through her arm. She turned with a violent start.

“Elfie, child! You frightened me as much as if you had been a real elf, or some water-wraith from the Rule, you came up so quietly.”

“I have been here a while, though you did not see me. I'm aye best with you, Adair,” dropping as she sometimes did, much to her mother's annoyance, into the country speech, pathetic in its simplicity on her lips. Adair pressed the hand that lay on her arm more closely to her. The girls stood for a moment in silence, Adair watching her sister. Elfie's

eyes wandered again to the sky. Suddenly she turned round. "Adair, you will tell me. What is wrong with me that mother and Aggie are aye saying I'm not like other people? Is it only my hair?" pushing back the dusky mass with a slender, trembling hand.

The words went to Adair's heart like a dart with a pang of positive physical pain, piercing through all the defences she had set up, and forcing on her for a moment the conviction she had so long battled against, that it was not the languor of weak health, or youth, or ignorance, or their lonely life that set her child-sister, as she still called her, apart. What was it? She caught her breath. What could she say, with those wide, mournful eyes fixed on her with less than usual of that veiled, shadowed look they so often wore, as if all their light were turned inward? An anxious questioning had awakened in their soft clouded depths. Was Elfie, too, becoming conscious of that intangible something lacking which she had dimly felt at times, and yet refused to

acknowledge? Better, far better, surely, that she should keep her child's nature as long as she could. Adair did not take time to reason this out; conviction and refusal of it passed through her mind in a flash. No, it could not be; she would not believe it. "If you are not like other people," kissing her, with a laugh, "it is because you are far better and dearer to me. You have not been strong, Elfie,—not had 'rude health,' as Mrs Mackay says, like me. Wait till you are a little older, and then we shall see. Now we must run, or it will be too dark to do anything at Earlshope."

CHAPTER III.

FROM the bridge the girls passed into the twilight of the woods, through which the boles of the old beeches already glimmered white and ghostly, while low down through the black network of branches glowed jewel-like here and there the last "red glimpses of the sunset. Elfie held her sister's arm more tightly, and her breath came quicker, as a belated rabbit scurried across their path; but wooding, save in the form of scattered and formal "plantings," is not now a feature of a district whose distinctive name was once the Forest, and a short rapid walk brought them out before the long irregular front of the great grey pile. The house was built in what an architect would call the Scottish baronial style, but it had a greater appearance of age

than it could justly claim. It had no associations with the old days of "riding and reiving," or with those stout old Borderers, each a little king in his own dale or glen, from whom its present owners were so proud to trace their descent. The old Earlshope was to be found farther up the glen, where on a scarped rock round which the Rule brawled stood a gaunt and crumbling old tower. From its battlements the bale-fire must often have

"Waved like a blood-flag in the sky,
All flaring and uneven,"

in answer to the signal reddening the southern horizon, and telling of the approach of the invading host with sword and brand, or rousing the clan to private feud even fiercer still. In days when revenge was a sacred duty, when blood could only be wiped out in blood, when the threatening cloud of foreign invasion hung for ever over the land, men built merely for defence and protection. It was only when the Union put an end to Border warfare, when the struggle between King's

men and Queen's men, and the still more furious strife between opposing religions had died down at last, that men found breath and leisure to cultivate the softer side of life. Then the laird of Earlshope had left his grim fortress to peaceful decay amid the solitude of the hills, and had built the old house which, in the hands of one of his successors with a passion for stone and lime, had grown into the modern mansion. Since his day his descendants had spent less and less time in their great house. The sons had gone to Eton and Oxford instead of to the High School and the College at Edinburgh, and the society there and of their country neighbours had grown too narrow and provincial for their wives and daughters. A doctor's brass plate had long ago been affixed to the door of what had once been their town house in Edinburgh, in one of those streets of monumentally massive houses running along the northern ridge, and boldly fronting all the bitter blasts from the Firth and the cold North Sea beyond. Those houses, with their huge pillared fronts

and frowning solidity of masonry, date from the evil hour when the name of Modern Athens was applied to the grey metropolis of the north, and produced that outbreak of pseudo-classicism whose results still load the Calton Hill and block up the green valley beneath the Castle. Save for a few weeks in the autumn Earlshope was deserted, and the rows upon rows of blank shuttered windows looked eerie and desolate enough. To the two girls this was, however, but its normal aspect—much more familiar than the brief period when it woke up to life and bustle. They passed the great Gothic porch, and turning the corner of the house, Adair rapped at a less pretentious door. The summons echoed through the empty passages, and died away into silence more than once before an elderly fresh-faced woman opened the door.

“Eh, Miss Adair,” she exclaimed, “but I’m fain to see ye. I was up in the mistress’s budoor and didna hear ye chappin’ for a while, an’ the lasses are here an’ there an’ a’ where through the hoose. Sic a carfuffle [bustle] as

we hae all been in since the letter came. A' they veesitors comin', an' every one with a man or a maid, let alane those that'll be comin' wi' Mrs Owen the day before. It's them I'm feared for, for they're a heap worse to serve than their betters. An' hoo am I an' they three lasses to have all this in order in a day or twa, an' me ne'er thinkin' they'd be here till aboot the twalfth as usual. I wunner hoo mony hauns Mrs Earlstoun thinks a woman has. Deed if she kent it, it would take us a' our time to wax the passages, let alane onything else. Get mair help, says she, but whaur am I to get it, Miss Adair? Ye ken brawly that ye could coont maist every lass in the parish on your ten fingers, an' they're a' busy wi' the hay e'eno. An' even if I could get them, a stirk off the hills would be as muckle use." Pouring out her "anxious plaint" all the way, the housekeeper led them down a long vaulted passage to her own special sanctum — a comfortable little room, though adorned, according to the taste of her class, with a cataract of cut paper overflowing

the fireplace, a profusion of bead mats, china vases, and some wonderful specimens of conchology, for which the sea was surely not wholly responsible. In one corner was a table set out with presents from "the family,"—a work-box, and some brilliantly-bound books, which Mrs Johnson handled with as much reverence as though they had been the sacred vessels on an altar. Over the mantelpiece was an engraving of a very slim and elegant young man, leaning on a dwarf column, apparently standing about for no particular reason, while the hand that supported his head was almost buried in clustering curls. This work of art from the inscription purported to be the portrait of Alexander Earlstoun, Esq., yr. of Earlshope, and was the gift of his grateful and attached obedient servants, the tenantry. The contrast between this young Apollo and the big, broad-shouldered, sandy-haired Uncle Alex she had always known, invariably made Adair smile. She had tried to preserve a decent gravity during Mrs Johnson's lamentations, but her estimate of

the maidens of the Rule Water made her laugh in spite of herself. She could sympathise only too well with the housekeeper's tribulations. Was it not the burden of her own existence trying to tone down some staring red-cheeked Jeanie or Mirren into some resemblance to a conventional maid? But too often, just as she was beginning to think that her labours were at last going to bear some fruit, the damsel would calmly inform her that she could "pit up wi't nae langer, it was ower dull, an' she was gaun back to the ferm." The rough work of the fields was apparently amply compensated for by the presence of "the lauds," and the abundant opportunities for "daffing" which is the rustic form of light flirtation. When a couple take to walking side by side in heavy slouching silence, business is meant. "I am sure I wish we were like those fortunate people in books," Adair would say in wrathful amusement; "a genteel family in reduced circumstances like ourselves would be certain to have some venerable nurse or housekeeper of universal attainments and unex-

amplified devotion, who would do everything for nothing, and in her wrinkled person combine as many offices as 'the cook and the captain bold' of immortal memory."

"Deed it's no laughin' matter, Miss Adair," said the housekeeper, sitting down with an injured air. When Mrs Owen arrived, Mrs Johnson subsided into a very subordinate position; but in her absence she had sole charge of the house, and as a rule rather resented Mrs Earlstoun's commissions to Adair. "Surely she could see after things as well, if no' better, than that bit lassie;" but the greatness of the crisis made her willing to accept any help.

"Could you not get some one from Muirshiels?" suggested Adair. "No; I suppose that would be almost as bad: the mills take up all the girls there. Edinburgh then? I would write for you if you like." But there was no break in the cloud that overspread Mrs Johnson's countenance.

"There's nae time for writin', and how could I gang tae Embro'?"

Once a - year the worthy woman paid a solemn visit to the capital, to a relative bearing the somewhat involved title of "ma gude-sister's brither's wife," and such a journey was not to be lightly undertaken.

"I will go, then," said Adair, rather reluctantly, "if it is really needful."

"Needfu'! I should think it was needfu'. I'll be awfu' thankful if ye could go. Ye'll no' let the morn pass, Miss Adair?"

"No; I will try to go to-morrow. If it is not too dark, there are some things I should like to see about to-night," said Adair, rising and cutting short Mrs Johnson's flood of incoherent thanks.

The resounding galleries, the great dim rooms where the shrouded furniture took such strange shapes in the gathering darkness, the half-seen portraits frowning down from the walls like so many spectral watchers of the solitary intruder, might have daunted any one more given to imaginative tremors than Adair. She had been busy for some time, hardly noticing how dark it was growing, till

she was reluctantly compelled to admit that her candle was but a poor substitute for daylight. Absorbed in her work, she had for the moment almost forgotten that Elfie had accompanied her, and paused, startled, as a distant strain of music, ethereally sweet, unspeakably mournful, swelled and rose, and then died away in a sobbing wail. Adair hurried down the long passage, and out on to the open gallery that ran round the hall. The lofty vaulted roof was already lost in shadow, and she looked down into a gulf of darkness, save where a couple of candles made a little circle of light, and glimmered on the gilded pipes of an organ in an arched recess. The light fell full on Elfie's pale face, wearing now a rapt spiritualised look, and on the long slender hands that were drawing the very heart-throbs out of the old organ. Here at least she was in a world of her own, where mind and soul awoke to their full powers, and cast off for the time the trammels that seemed to bind them down in everyday life. Forgetting all else, Adair stood entranced. Music

had always a powerful effect upon her, though she herself was in no way musical in the sense of being a performer. Unless she had possessed a most decided bent for it, she had had certainly but little opportunity of acquiring any facility. Mrs Earlstoun was under the impression that she had, unaided, educated her daughters; but those feeble and intermittent attempts had soon come to an end. The Misses Earlstoun could not, of course, go to the village school, and to send them to Edinburgh, or even to Muirshiels, was out of the question. Any formal teaching that the girls did get dwindled down at last to joining occasionally in Isabel's lessons under her very superior and condescending governess. To no one did it occur that this was but a poor preparation for the future for penniless lasses, even with "a lang pedigree." Their mother was serene in the conviction that her daughters would marry somehow. An Earlstoun be reduced to earning her bread? Impossible! No other one, as may be supposed, thought about the matter. Fortunately for herself,

Adair had access to the little-used library at Earlshope, where, in the long summer days, she could read all day if she chose. In winter, when driven from it by cold, she could carry her books home, though when every one was gathered round the single lamp in the drawing-room at the Old Manse, it was hard to give undivided attention to her reading. Such knowledge as she had, she had conscientiously striven to impart to Elfie; but all her pains and patience met for a long time with but little reward. What was learned the one day seemed to have wholly passed away before the next, and simplify her explanations as she would, they were received with the same blank look of bewilderment. Music had at first been no better. Notes and lines and spaces seemed an inscrutable mystery to Elfie, till all at once apparently she had awakened to the possession of her strange gift. Where she had heard or learned the weird mournful music she played, Adair could not guess; it seemed to flow from under the long nervous fingers as a bird's song from

its full throat. The wild music sobbed and wailed under the lofty roof like some great inarticulate anguish ever striving to find utterance, but in vain. It thrilled the listening girl, standing on the threshold of life, with a vague tumult of feeling, foreboding or anticipation, hope or dread, she could not have told. Suddenly the music expired with a gasp, and a small boy emerged from behind the organ saying, "Please, Miss Elfie, I'm fair beat, an' it's getting awful dark," looking rather disconsolately into the gloom beyond the little island of light. Adair descended from her perch, saying, with a laugh, "We are very unmerciful, I am afraid, Tom; but we'll see you safe to Mrs Johnson's quarters." She closed the organ, and drew her sister away. Elfie went with her like some one walking in sleep. Outside, although it was late July, and the days were shortening, it was not yet dark: the long northern twilight still lingered in the sky. It was that sweetest hour of the summer day, "'twixt the gloamin' and the mirk"; the flowing sculpturesque lines of the

hills stood out dark and solemn against the pure transparency of the lower heavens ; up in the purpling zenith a few stars were faintly visible ; the distant murmur of the Rule filled all the air.

The change from this mystic twilight world, where every harsher sound or sight was hushed and veiled by the soft oncoming of the summer night, to the dining-room, with the lamp in the middle of the big table, like a globe of burning brightness, and all Agnes's wardrobe lying about or piled on the chairs, was rather bewildering at first.

“What an age you have been, Adair!” cried Agnes impatiently. “I think you might have come back a little sooner, when you knew I wanted your help. Now I will just have to clear away all those things till to-morrow. I think I might bundle them all off to a rag store, or take a contract for fitting out scare-crows,”—and with a gesture of despair Agnes sat down amid her scattered possessions, like another Marius amid the ruins of Carthage. Adair suddenly remembered her promise to

Mrs Johnson, and after a rapid and rueful calculation of the cost of a journey to Edinburgh, made known her plan with a good deal of trepidation. To her surprise Agnes received it with acclamation.

“Nothing could be better! What a lucky chance! We shall both go. You can tell Aunt Evelyn that you required my valuable opinion and advice in such a weighty matter, and mildly suggest to her that, since it was solely on her business we went, she will of course pay our way, at least. We shall glue our noses to every shop window in Princes Street. If ever my ship comes in, I shall bid a long good-bye to woods and wilds, and take up my abode where at least there will be shops and pavements. We can get what we want there—I have made out quite a list—instead of at Muirshiels. We would get far nicer things, and I am sure they would not be any dearer. They have only such common stuff in Muirshiels. We shall have a real good day’s shopping, only one will see so many lovely things we cannot have. Oh, dear me,

I wonder if I shall ever be able to buy a pair of gloves, or a sixpence worth of ribbon, without feeling as if I were committing the seven deadly sins?"

"Go instead of me, Aggie, since you would enjoy it so much. I don't care about going, for my part, and"—hesitating—"I don't think more than one of us ought to go."

"Nonsense, Adair; of course if you are going to make a case of conscience out of it, there's an end of it. Do you think it would be any treat to me to trail about Edinburgh all day inspecting maids? You would never have gone except on Aunt Evelyn's account, and what does the difference between ten shillings and a pound matter to her? I am inclined, for my part, to regard the whole thing as a providence, but evidently you look on it as falsehood, fraud, and wilful imposition."

"Come, Adair, you are getting positively censorious," said Mrs Earlstoun. "You may surely trust your mother's judgment, and to me Agnes's plan seems a very good one. You will get a far better choice certainly."

“But, mother, what does a choice matter when we have nothing to choose with?” said Adair desperately.

“I mean to speak to your uncle, Adair. Agnes and I have been discussing it all evening. Of course it is not pleasant, but I really feel it to be a duty, and I hope I never shrink from a duty. I wonder he does not notice himself that your dress is not at all like what his nieces ought to have.”

Adair laughed. “Do you think Uncle Alex ever noticed, in all his life, what anybody had on? If I were a figure on an ancient coin he might notice my garments, or lack of them, but not otherwise.”

“Oh, well, if his sense of duty to his dead brother’s children, after all his promises, does not prompt him to do what is right by them, then I must.”

“Mother, I wish you would not. I do wish you would not. What will it matter to any of those people who are coming how we are dressed? They are not likely to think twice about us, if they notice us at all. I am sure

we could manage without it. Please don't ask anything for me, at least. I can make my white silk do quite well."

"Speak for yourself, if you please, Adair. If you are so willing to be overlooked, I am not, I can tell you. There is no use of playing the part of 'the violet by the mossy stone' at this time of day. Modest worth and veiled charms, and all the rest of it, are played out nowadays. I mean to be noticed if I can, I assure you. Besides, if you are willing to wear Isabel's old gowns, I don't see why you should make a fuss about taking money to spend on new ones, especially when mammy is going to take the trouble of asking for it, and we are to have the pleasure of spending it,"—laying her hand on her mother's with a caressing gesture.

"*You* understand me at least, Agnes," said Mrs Earlstoun plaintively.

Adair said nothing. She was too much used to such endings to family discussions, in which, somehow, she seemed always to be put in the wrong. Where was the good of saying that

that white silk gown was like the shirt of Nessus to her proud spirit, still less of reminding Agnes how she had speculated as to the possible reversion of a pale pink, which would just have suited her blonde colouring? Though the Rule and the glen had grown part of her very being, she wished, as she had done often enough before, that they could go anywhere else. Once away from the shadow of Earls-hope, surely their poverty would seem less mean and pitiful, or else such paltry devices would not be needful.

“Suppose we were to get our dresses made in Edinburgh when we are at it,” said Agnes, a fresh idea occurring to her. “Does it not seem a pity to give Miss Jarvie good stuff to spoil it? So much depends on the making of a dress,—look at Isabel’s. The material does not look worth twopence often enough, but then they have such an air.”

“Suppose we go up to the Castle and borrow the crown jewels,” said Adair, her patience suddenly giving way, as too often it did. “If we must beg for money, would it not be as

well to have it before deciding how it is to be spent?"

"Dear me, I wonder what makes Adair so cross? It is a pity we cannot discuss anything without her flaring out in that fashion," said Agnes in innocent amazement, before the door had well closed upon her sister.

"I did not think a child of mine would have referred to me as a beggar," said Mrs Earlstoun, fixing on the unlucky word.

"Never mind, mammy; I am sure she did not mean it."

"Such things ought not to be said, whether they are meant or not," said Mrs Earlstoun with unappeasable dignity; which incontrovertible statement poor Adair up in her own room was only too heartily echoing, her brown eyes smarting with unshed tears, while she poured all the vials of wrath on her own luckless head.

CHAPTER IV.

“WHY, what on earth are you good people doing? Have you set up dressmaking? You need not look indignant, Agnes; it is quite the thing, I can assure you. My milliner is a duke’s daughter, and a very good milliner she is too; only, she makes one pay for the privilege. You seem to be going in for the business on a most extensive scale. You don’t object to my coming in here, I hope? The maid (surely she is a very freshly-caught specimen, Adair) tried to head me into the drawing-room, much in the way she has been accustomed to ‘shoo’ a cow, I should think. When I said I would come in here, she seemed inclined to dispute the passage by main force. ‘The miss had tell’t her she was to pit a’body into the paurlour.’ I ventured however to

think I was not altogether 'a'body,' and we could have our talk while you were working. What are you busy with? Really," picking up a piece of very glazed black silk, "do you think that it is worth spending so much time on old things? You can buy new stuff so cheaply nowadays, that all that ripping and sponging and turning which delighted our grandmothers' thrifty souls seems a positive waste of existence. Life is too short for it."

All this was uttered very deliberately in a high resonant voice, while the speaker's prominent light-grey eyes took in every detail of the room, and seemed to read the discomfiture which each of its occupants was striving to hide. The Old Manse dining-room, it had to be admitted, was by no means looking its somewhat sorry best that morning. The much-talked-of visit to Edinburgh had been accomplished, when, to Adair's utter dismay, Agnes had calmly taken the lead, sailed in and out of the big Princes Street shops, and ordered this and that, till the girls had returned laden

with packages that weighed like a burden upon Adair's conscience.

"Don't be so silly about it, Adair," Agnes said coolly; "if we must ask something from Uncle Alex, we may as well get what we want when we are at it. And, after all, it is not such an appalling sum; it would seem nothing to any one who was not accustomed to turn every sixpence twice as we do."

It was quite true the amount was not large, but to Adair, who knew it could only be paid by painful economy or by that appeal to her uncle which to her would be an unspeakable humiliation, it seemed alarming enough. She had altogether refused to follow Agnes's example, and indulge in the gloves and slippers and the little et-ceteras which that young person pronounced to be absolutely needful to a finished toilet. "As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," she said, laughing; "and if that is not an appropriate proverb for the descendants of Border cattle-lifters, I don't know what is."

On one point Adair had had her own way,

that they should make some of their things at home ; and then Mrs Earlstoun had discovered that a certain old black silk would “ look as good as new ” if turned and renovated by some patent process of sponging in which she had the most devout faith. The sombre room was strewn all over with the inevitable litter of dressmaking—linings, patterns, and pins were everywhere. Agnes at the big table was very gingerly sponging the breadths of silk, and looking dolefully at her finger-tips every now and then ; while Adair was whirring so busily at the sewing-machine that the altercation between Mirren and their visitor had not been heard. Without, the morning was dull and overcast, and the leafy screen gave a greenish tone to the light in the room. The opening door let in a flood of brightness, against which the new-comer’s tall figure stood outlined in striking relief.

In a moment Adair recovered herself, and rising with a laugh, swept the nearest chair clear. “ Stay here by all means, Isabel, if you like, though I think you would find ‘ the paur-

lour,' as Mirren calls it, more comfortable. It was good of you to come across so soon after your journey, and with all those people on your hands."

"Oh, the journey is nothing; it is the people. If there is any position in which one may say 'Save me from my friends' more devoutly than another, it is in a country house before the shooting begins. That provides for the men at least, and the women have always letters to write or some fads of that sort. But I am not behaving prettily. How do you do, Aunt Agnes?" stooping down and presenting a firm smooth cheek for the little lady's salute. Poor Mrs Earlstoun was always reduced to a state of fluttering nervousness in Isabel's large assured presence. "I don't need to ask, though. After all, there is some compensation for the country mice. I wonder if I should look as fresh at your age if I took to a quiet country life. Do you never mean to grow old at all, Aunt Agnes? Why, Aggie, child, you are getting quite grown-up looking. Dear me, what an elaborate *coiffure*. I think

Fanchette might take a hint from it. It must take you an enormous time to do it. How can you afford so much time in the morning? If I were you, I should reserve it till I was *en grande tenue*. But there is somebody amissing, surely? Oh yes; Elfie, of course. Or rather—don't you think we really ought to try and call her Evelyn? Such an odd nickname makes every one ask what it means; and, really, the fact is it is only too suitable. Why doesn't she help you? Do you think it quite wise, Aunt Agnes, to let her have so much time to moon away?" And having successfully touched each one upon the most vulnerable point, Miss Earlstoun sat placidly down. She was tall and fair, and by no means specially handsome. Women who disliked her refused to admit that she had any share of good looks; but even they were compelled to allow that she possessed that mysterious quality which, for want of a better word, we call style, though it savours nowadays too much of the cheap advertisements and dressmakers' vocabulary. Whatever she

wore seemed absolutely the right thing for the occasion. Whether from luck or foresight, she was never among the ranks of the foolish virgins who are found shivering dismally in muslin gowns and with gauzy parasols at some drizzling east-windy garden-party; nor if the sun chanced to break out in unexpected splendour was she ever surprised like her less fortunate sisters wrapped in heavy tweed and furs, causing a feeling of suffocation to those around. From a fashionable if not from the classical point of view, her figure was perfect, and full justice was done to its proportions by her Redfern gowns and riding-habits. She was the very type of girl who is seen to fullest advantage on horseback or in some trim, workmanlike, tailor-made gown. But probably those who came to this conclusion in the morning would change their minds again in the evening. "Somehow she is always effective," was the general verdict. Possibly this agreeable consciousness of being faultlessly dressed, the most reassuring to the human mind, contributed not a little to the natural

composure of Miss Earlstoun's manners, and her calm certainty of being always in the right, while it might account for the fact that however she might be copied and admired, she was not exactly universally beloved. To-day she wore a pale-grey summer tweed, with a mannish little white vest, and a high linen collar clasping the full white throat. Hat, sunshade, and the long gloves that made the large well-shaped hands lying in her lap look as if cut out of grey marble, were exactly the same tone of colour—a costume perfectly suited to the dull cloudy morning, but which would have looked quite cool and fresh in sunshine. Sitting opposite to her, Adair became instantly conscious that her ruddy coils were a good deal roughened and loosened by stooping over the machine, that somehow she had got two distinct spots of oil on her dress, and that nothing could so successfully disguise whatever divinity the human form might be endowed with as a home-made cotton frock. Isabel's presence had generally this depressing effect, making slimness seem insignificant,

more vivid colouring mere blowsiness to its owner's mental vision,—in fact, that it was “bad form” to be anything else but large, and fair, and tranquil.

“And how is your dear mamma—Mrs Earls-toun, I should say? I hope she is quite well after all the fatigues of town,” said Mrs Earls-toun, in the nervous ingratiating tone which always made Adair's heart burn within her.

“Oh, she is quite well, thanks,” carelessly; “but the fatigues of town are nothing to what lie before us.”

“You will have your brother to help you to entertain your visitors this time.”

“Douglas!” lifting her eyebrows a little; “I don't know if we can count much on him. Young men always expect to be amused when they are good enough to come home for a little. Besides, he has not turned up yet. I suppose he has some little diversion of his own on hand—at least I fancy so, as we have not seen very much of him since his return.”

“Why, I thought he had only just returned.”

“ Oh dear, no, he has been all season in town ; evidently he finds it a pleasant change after the Cape, seeing he has not been able to tear himself away from it yet. By the by, Adair, could you give us afternoon tea if I brought the mob across ? Lord Lorrimore is by way of being an antiquarian ; he and father hit it off no end, as you may suppose. There are some queer old stones and funny inscriptions, I believe, in the old burying-ground,—anything does for a pretence. They could potter about there for a bit, and then come here for tea and tennis if any one has energy enough for it.”

Adair remained silent, and looked so pointedly at her mother that Isabel was compelled to turn to Mrs Earlstoun. “ Would it bore you dreadfully, Aunt Agnes ? ” with the air of one complying with a very needless form.

“ Oh, my dear, I should be delighted, I am sure,—quite an honour, I am sure,—but it is only a very humble entertainment we could offer——”

“If that is any difficulty, Mrs Owen could send something across——”

“Thank you, Isabel,” struck in Adair, rather shortly; “if it would not be a trouble to mother, I think we shall manage to give the mob tea on our own basis after they have amused themselves a little among the tombs. It is a pity the ‘mute inglorious Miltons’ of the Rule Water cannot know the honour that is in store for them. They are more fortunate than ‘Imperial Cæsar dead and turned to clay,’ &c. You have really a genius for turning everything to account, Isabel.”

“Ah, well, one has to learn to make use of everything,” said Isabel complacently, evidently considering Adair’s remarks to be complimentary.

“I make only one condition,” went on Adair, “and that is, that you let me know when we may expect the mob. ‘The hind let loose’ will require some special training for such an important social function.”

“The what? Oh, you mean the maid, I suppose. Why on earth do you call her

that?" a perception of the slenderest joke not being amongst Miss Earlstoun's gifts.

"The title seems to me appropriate, but perhaps it would take too long to explain," replied Adair, a sparkle waking in the brown depths of her eyes.

"And so Sir Claud Maxwell is going to stand for Muirshiels," said Mrs Earlstoun, feeling she had been left out of the talk long enough. "That will take up most of his time, I should think. Dear me, an election used to be a wonderful affair in my young days. I remember the last one at Clayborough, just before my marriage——"

"Ah, yes, things have changed a good deal since then," said Isabel languidly, rising as she spoke.

"Why don't you turn your friends loose on the Muirshiels weavers, Isabel,—set them a-canvassing? They would gain some fresh experiences, I venture to think," laughed Adair. "What are Sir Claud's politics, by the by?"

"Really I don't know. I think he is a

Socialist, or a Communist, or something of that sort. It is the fashion to be rather revolutionary just now."

"The redder the better for Muirshiels, but it is hard to see how Middleton and communistic theories could be logically held together."

"Oh, I don't suppose anybody is quite in earnest about those sort of things. You'll come across to-night, Adair? We are rather in want of girls, for a wonder, and there are one or two odd men to be talked to."

Adair was standing with her hands hanging loosely folded before her. She clasped them so tightly together that each finger left a red indented mark on the white skin.

"Yes, I shall come," she said, after a second's pause, "if mother can spare me."

"Oh yes, my dear," fluttered Mrs Earlstoun, "if you can be of use to your aunt——"

"Oh, we shall want her pretty often, and Elfie too: that odd playing of hers would be rather a novelty. Mother will come across in proper form to see you, Aunt Agnes, and

bring some of the dowagers likely. You'll come across some evening soon,—and there is Aggie too," as if awakening to her presence. "Yes," critically, "I dare say it is time you were making your appearance; but we cannot swamp our friends with cousins all at once, you understand? You'll excuse me asking, Adair, but I suppose you have a frock to come in. Of course, I can explain that you are not in the way of fashions here, but people do say such things if one looks at all behind the time."

Adair threw back her head, the red glow kindling in her eyes. "Thank you, Isabel," she said, with a hard little laugh. "Tell them I am an aborigine, and they will probably be gratefully surprised that my ideas of costume extend beyond the sweet simplicity of a necklace."

"I can easily lend you a necklace," said Isabel serenely, apparently noticing only the last word; "but I must really go. I shall be wanted at home; and besides, I am keeping you all back, and you must be impatient to get done with this mess."

“Hateful creature!” exclaimed Agnes, springing to her feet, and executing a dance of exasperation, the instant the door was closed. “Great, fat, white, stupid, spiteful thing! Mess indeed! I should think it is a mess—more’s the pity. I think she has some sort of second-sight, she always takes one at a disadvantage; and to think of the time I spent this morning arranging the flowers in the drawing-room, just in case she should come across! It is too bad,” actual tears of vexation rising in her blue eyes.

“She has certainly a positive genius for finding out the joints in one’s harness, intentionally or not,” said Adair, the bitterness not quite gone from her voice.

“Of course it is intentional. I do believe if she were on visiting terms with the Queen, she would manage to pop in when her Gracious Majesty had just taken off her cap. I am sure she would. I don’t know how you can be so civil to her, Adair. I think I showed her by my silence what I thought.” Poor Agnes! It was rather hard upon her, after all her plans,

that even Elfie should be more specially invited than she.

“No wonder I was civil. I am to go across and talk to odd men, and I am to have a necklace lent me,” said Adair gravely.

“One thing is certain, I shall make myself scarce when her precious friends come across. I don’t see why we should be bothered with them. We ought to have told her we objected to being ‘swamped’ too.”

“Of course we have to put up with a great deal in our position. If your poor dear father had lived, or your uncle had had a proper sense of duty, things would have been very different,” plained Mrs Earlstoun, painfully conscious of her limpest cap. “But still, Adair, I do think you are too subservient to your cousin,—too ready to fall in with all her plans; and why would you not let her send something across? It was only proper she should do so, when she is bringing all those people here. Although I have given up household things to you, there are some matters you might refer to me. Does it never

occur to you that it must be painful to me to sit by and have no voice in what is going on in my own house? It is a mistake to be too yielding."

Adair looked at her mother for a moment in silence, a sort of helpless expression on her face; then suddenly turning to her work, she said, "Well, Isabel is right in one thing at least,—we must get done with this mess."

CHAPTER V.

“THEN I may depend on you to-morrow, Saunders?”

“Ay, if we’re a’ spared I’ll no fail ye; but it’s awfu’ grudgin’ to spend so muckle time just on the grass, an’ a’ for a wheen idle folk to loup an’ caper ower’t after a ba’, like so many weans. It’s clean lamentable to see responsible bein’s pittin’ by their precious time in sic a way.”

“What about the curling, Saunders?” said Adair mischievously. “I think there was a good deal of time spent on Kirkfield loch last winter,” — a vision rising before her of the old man at the head of an eager band, broom in hand, “sooping up” a laggard stone over the smooth black ice, oblivious for the moment of anything in heaven or earth but

the slowly advancing curling-stone, which, like some sentient thing, seemed to follow the deftly plied brooms.

“Ah, but that’s different—clean different, Miss Adair. I’d hae ye notice the time o’ year for curlin’, when, as ye may say, there’s neither earin’ nor harvest. Deed I think the hand o’ Providence is in’t, for isna a man better warmin’ his bluid on the ice than blawin’ his fingers at the fire-end? But apairt from that, wad ye even a gude bonspeil when the ice is keen wi’ that haverin’ game ye ca’ tennis? But there”—compassionately—“what need I speak to a lassie o’ curlin’? If ye’d e’er lowsed a stane, Miss Adair, ye’d ken the differ.”

“That is another proof that you men keep the best things of life to yourselves. Well, seeing I can play tennis, though I can’t or mayn’t curl, you will be sure to come to-morrow;” and Adair turned away with a laugh, and, sauntering a little farther along the road, sat down on the low parapet of a bridge spanning a little tributary of the Rule.

In consequence of Isabel's morning visit, she had come down to the Water-foot in search of Saunders, who had been invisible at the Old Manse for some days. In view of the imminent incursion of "the mob," the grass needed cutting; everything, as she said, had a run-to-seed look, and needed a tidying up beyond her unaided powers. The cloudy morning had given place to a still hot afternoon, and to Adair the Water-foot had never seemed so far away, nor the road so long and dusty. After passing the Earlshope gates the road left the water, whose murmur always made some semblance of coolness, and ran straight and shadeless through the fields, past the village, and on to the little wayside station, where an occasional very local train stopped, and where a solitary passenger or some stray package was the sole "traffic" from the glen. Village was almost too ambitious a title for the one or two houses that had aimlessly collected round the church—the abodes of the few farm-labourers, who, with the shepherds scattered

far and wide among the hills, made up the population of the parish. Beside the church, as uninteresting a structure within and without as, with but few exceptions, Scotch country kirks generally are, was the manse ; a square, solid, grey house, set in the midst of a very formal garden. Culture was represented by the inevitable board-school, much too large for the few children ; while commerce, to which this age and country are supposed to be wholly given up, was absent, unless the tin of mustard, the two long clay pipes carefully elevated in opposite directions, and the few seedy biscuits in a cottage window, could be regarded as a sign of our national pursuit. Adair sometimes thought that she would buy one of those biscuits out of curiosity ; to her they seemed unchanged through all the years she could remember. She was sitting now on the bridge, debating idly whether she ought to call at the manse or not. It would save her the long walk some other time, which was a strong argument for doing her duty ; but on the other hand she was hot and tired,

and not in the mood to have all the little Mackays' infantile ailments, and the special treatment of each case, detailed for her benefit. This, with the surprising ingenuity the said little invalids displayed in intervals of health in the destruction of their garments, and the singularly ungrateful conduct of all her domestics, formed the threefold cord of their mother's conversation. Then, if she went now she would certainly have to stay for tea, and tea at a table round which so many olive-plants were growing was apt to be a series of crises rather trying to unaccustomed nerves. Some one would certainly spill his tea, or cut his finger, or covet his brother's "piece" as being more liberally buttered than his own, and the soothing or scolding of each miscreant would swell the general babel. No, she would not go: surely to have sewed all morning, and trudged to the Water-foot in the afternoon, with the prospect of entertaining "the odd men" at Earlshope in the evening, was a sufficient balance for one day to the credit-side to

satisfy the most tyrant conscience, without any further sacrifice to supposed duty. So she sat in the heavy afternoon heat, listening to the tinkle of the burn falling from ledge to ledge in mimic waterfalls, as it hurried down to join its tiny thread to the wider waters of the Rule. Save for an occasional shrill shout from the high-walled manse garden, telling of the "young barbarians all at play" within, the village was singularly still,—even the smithy was shut. Saunders had disappeared into his cottage, and the others seemed empty. Every one was evidently out in the hay-fields, and from the bridge she could see the busy black specks moving about in the distance. Through the hot haze the hills loomed up dim and spectral, rising and falling in misty wave upon wave, fold beyond fold. Colour in the landscape there was none. In the white veiled sunlight the grassy slopes, whose first vivid freshness had long faded, looked grey rather than green, save where here and there the wiry bent-grass on the upland pastures was already showing the

yellow tinge of autumn. The Earlshope woods in the uniform dark-green of late midsummer, and the belts of pine and fir, lay like bands of blackness against the pale hillsides. Even the beauty of passing clouds, dappling the hills with fitful flying shadows, fleeting and changing with each moment, was wanting; not a wisp of vapour broke the expanse of faint blue above. Adair was rising at last with an anticipative sigh at the thought of the long shelterless road between stone walls or high thorn hedges, powdered white with dust, that lay before her, when the rapid trot of a horse struck upon her ear. In another moment a high light dog-cart swung round the sharp corner by the smithy. Some one for Earlshope, she thought, deciding that it was better to sit still, though the bridge was narrow, than to obey her first impulse and rise, as the rapid movement might startle the horse. The driver pulled up somewhat, and came slowly over the bridge, either from a considerate desire to lessen the cloud of dust raised by the wheels, or to

get a better look at the white figure on the parapet, at the face a little less pale than usual to-day, and the bright hair relieved against the big white sunshade. Conscious of being stared at, Adair kept her eyes severely fixed on the farthest hills, when, handing the reins to the groom, a young man hastily precipitated himself on to the road, exclaiming, "It is really you, Adair! I was sure I could not be mistaken."

Adair's swift sudden blush, all the lovelier for its transience and the quickly following pallor, like the light and shadow on her own hills and glen, flooded all her face and throat as she rose and silently put her hand into her cousin's stretched out to meet it.

"Haven't you a word of welcome for the returned wanderer? Remember I shall expect as much coddling as the prodigal after all those years."

"I am afraid you look altogether too prosperous and cheerful to pose as that overrated young man. Perhaps it is only prejudice, but I cannot think of him apart from rags and

repentance. You certainly don't show much sign of either," said Adair, with a laugh that had a little nervous ring in it.

"Not the first, luckily; my tailor is forbearing. But how do you know that I am not devoured by the other?"

"If there is any need for it, I am glad to hear that you are in such an edifying frame of mind. We shall be on the outlook for 'works meet for repentance.'"

Douglas laughed. "I shall make no rash promises. But what good luck brought you here? You'll let me drive you home, of course?—it will be like old times. Here, Jackson, you can go behind. Now, Adair, Meg is getting impatient."

Meg's impatience was not, however, destined to be speedily relieved. The young man drove at a very different pace from that at which he had approached the bridge. Instead of being given her head as usual, Meg found herself restrained almost to a walk, a proceeding for which she showed her disgust and contempt by every possible

toss and snort and fidget. But two miles in a light dog-cart behind a big powerful mare, however tightly held in, soon pass. In a little they were at the Earlshope gates and the stone bridge over the Rule. Adair made a slight motion to descend, which Douglas overruled at once with a "Nonsense, Adair, I shall take you home; it is no distance to come back." After the first few jesting words the cousins had been a little silent. It is not easy at first to pick up the broken links of friendship, or perhaps something more than friendship, after years of absence.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am to see the old place again," Douglas exclaimed, when the grey turrets of Earlshope rose above the encircling trees. "I have dreamt of the hills and the Rule in many a strange place."

Involuntarily Isabel's hints of the morning flashed across Adair's mind. In some way he seemed almost to divine her thoughts, for he added with a laugh—

"I have been in no great hurry to come back to them, you think, in spite of my pro-

testations. Everything was so fresh to me when I came home at first. I never had been a season in town before, I was such a boy—in some things at least—when I went away; or rather, the powers that be chose to regard me as such, so it was all new to me. Well, I had a good enough time, for a while at any rate.” He broke off rather abruptly, and then said with a somewhat forced laugh, “Rather funny to be confessing to the feelings of a *débutante* at my time of life.”

“I wish you had had a brighter day for your first. I am jealous for the honour of our hills. The haze makes everything look so washed-out and faded.”

“Not quite everything,” said the young man, almost involuntarily, but then he was looking at his cousin and not at the hills. “You are not going to deprive me of my cousinly right of freedom of speech,” as Adair frowned a little; “I am going to insist upon all my old privileges. But here we are,” pulling up at the gate. “I begin to feel myself at home in earnest. May I not

come in and see Aunt Agnes?" he asked, when he had helped Adair down, as she stood with her hand on the gate, evidently expecting him to go. "I used to run in and out at all hours. Am I to be restricted to ceremonious visits now?"

"Come in, if you choose," said Adair, laughing, "though I should think you will be expected at home."

"I don't think they will excite themselves much whether I appear half-an-hour later or not at all. As a family we have our feelings admirably under control, as you will have observed, no doubt. Besides, when people have got on very well without you for five years, they are not likely to begin to pine for you after a couple of days."

"Isabel certainly did not seem to expect you to-day."

"Ah! you have seen her then? Her speeches are not, as a rule, to be classed among the eternal verities, as you have discovered, I daresay, before now. I meant to have stayed longer, indeed I ought to have

done so, but I took a longing to be off too, and here I am. You can go, Jackson," to the man, who had been watching this little parley at the gate with the utmost interest under the blank expressionless mask of a well-trained servant. Meg, whose sense of ill-usage at so much unreasonable delay had been becoming acute, was off in an instant.

A new light kindled in Mrs Earlstoun's blue eyes as the two young people appeared on the lawn together, and she greeted Douglas with a good deal of tearful tender effusion, which was very pretty and touching to the young man. It seems so natural that our friends should have missed us, and be overjoyed on our return ; though, perhaps, if we interrogate our own consciousness, we may find that the separation from them has caused no special blank in our existence. The group under the old thorn-tree was a very pretty and home-like one : Mrs Earlstoun's black dress served as a foil to the light ones of the girls. Agnes, as fresh and dainty as though old gowns and the sponging of

black silk were things unknown, was busy with her usual trifle of work, which, however doubtful its ultimate usefulness might be, served meantime as the cause of many pretty little manipulations and bird-like turns of the head. Elfie lay on the grass, her head propped on her hands, her thick hair falling round her face like a screen. A book was before her, but her eyes were fixed on the dim hills. And over all was the dappling of light and shade, as the sunlight filtered through the thick leafy roof overhead.

There was a little tumult of greeting. Mrs Earlstoun's satisfaction knew no bounds when she learned that Douglas had not yet been home—that he had come to see her first. The poor lady had not often the pleasure of being put before any one else, least of all her stately sister-in-law; and though she talked of a mother's feelings, and attempted a playful little reproach, her elation was manifest.

“And so, Douglas, you have come home for good?” she said, after the first breathless interchange of questions.

"I hope so; I should be sorry if it were for bad," laughed the young man.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I wonder your mother could let you stay away so long—five whole years nearly; really I can hardly believe it. You are not so much changed. You are a thorough Earlstoun, Douglas; you don't take after your mother's side at all."

"More's the pity for me then. Maurice, poor chap, absorbed all the good looks of the family; the rest of us are not much to boast of in that line, it must be confessed."

Douglas was tall and strongly built like all his race, but to call him a big fellow, or "a buirdly chiel" as the Rule Water folk would have said, was more descriptive than to say he was a tall man. He was fair, as most of the Earlstouns were, but the closely cropped hair and conventional heavy moustache had the slightly reddish tinge which is generally supposed to be a national characteristic. His features were not unlike his sister's, though more heavily moulded, but his eyes were deep-set, and, instead of being light and

cold like hers, were a grey-blue not unlike that of his native skies when what the shepherds call the "skaum," a thin veil of mist, spreads across their pale clear azure. When those grey-blue eyes smiled, as they could do very gently and tenderly, most people felt that Douglas Earlstoun's face was a very pleasant one to look on; and for the rest, if a man be tall and active, and above all perfectly dressed, few are inclined to be critical.

Mrs Earlstoun felt herself bound to combat Douglas's last remark, declaring first that he was far too modest, and then that after all good looks did not matter in a man. Everybody laughed, much to her astonishment, and Douglas said—

"If you are wishing a compliment in return for all these consolatory speeches, Aunt Aggie, I can give you it most honestly, for I am sure you don't look a day older, and really I think you look prettier if that can be, than when I went away—if Adair will allow so much plain speaking," with a swift glance in her direction.

“Are you two beginning your old quarrels already?” said Agnes.

“You two!”—how natural and pleasant it sounded. “As for Agnes,” went on Douglas, “I feel I need to make her acquaintance all over again. That I ever had the temerity to call such a fashionable young lady ‘wee Aggie’ seems impossible.”

“Don’t you find Adair changed too?” asked Agnes, smiling.

“No,” said Douglas, rather abruptly; but somehow the monosyllable conveyed a world of meaning to one at least of the little company. Adair had seated herself on the grass beside Elfie, and was softly stroking her brown hair—a habit that she had. Her face had the tender look it always wore for her young sister, but there was something more; it was not merely the flickering shadow of the leaves that deepened the expression in her eyes, and gave the slight tremulousness to the red curving lips.

“Aunt Aggie, I wish you would take pity on me and give me some tea,” said Douglas;

“I mean a real, honest, hearty tea, such as we used to have. I remember after a long day’s fishing how I used to plan to get coming here for tea, instead of going home for dinner. What havoc we made of Adair’s scones in those days! Do you ever make scones now, Adair? I have not seen a scone since I went away, and I think I could outdo even my former feats to-night.”

“My dear, we shall be only too glad,” said Mrs Earlstoun, delighted by an appeal to her hospitality, “if you will not be missed at home.”

“Do they miss me at home, do they miss me?” chanted Douglas, half-mockingly. “No, I don’t think they do. That is the worst of being so long away: one drops out of the old place, and it is not easy to make a new one.”

“I am sure your old place is ready for you here just the same.”

“Thank you, Aunt Aggie; and,”—falling back into his former laughing tone,—“if you mean my old place at table too, so much the better. I am afraid I shall astonish you. I

am as hungry as a wolf after the drive from Muirshiels. We were late at Preston, and then they rushed us past Carlisle, on which I had set my last hopes, if that is any excuse. If I go home and escape fainting by the way, I shall have to do the amiable to all these people, and I don't feel at all amiably disposed just now—towards people in general, at least. I don't know why one should always live in a crowd; one has more than enough of it in town, without having the same people planted on them here. Must you go, Adair?"

"To be sure I must, unless you are to perish of starvation before our eyes. Tea and scones are not spontaneous growths."

"Oh, but I never dreamt of troubling you."

"Oh, don't distress yourself; it is no trouble—I always do it."

"Dear Adair, I don't know what we should do without her," murmured Mrs Earlstoun, as the girl disappeared.

"I don't know indeed," echoed Elfie. A remark of any kind from her, save in answer

to a question, was so unusual that every one turned round.

"You and Adair were always great allies, were you not?" said Douglas.

"Yes, I couldn't live without her," said the girl, lifting her eyes to his face. Something in that look thrilled the young man,— "gave him the shivers," as he very unromantically termed it to himself, not being an adept at describing his emotions.

"Do you remember your cousin Douglas in those old days at all?" he asked kindly. "You were a funny, dreamy, little woman then, and I am afraid we used to tease you often."

"Not you; Maurice did whiles, but you were aye kind," instinctively using the same words as she had done to Adair.

"Elfie," said her mother sharply, annoyed out of her unusual serenity, "I cannot think where you pick up these words. What will your cousin think of you?"

"I like to hear it—it sounds quite pretty from Elfie. Dallas would be charmed with it;

he would call it local colouring, and I don't know what else."

"Mr Dallas is with you just now? I think Isabel mentioned him to-day."

"Yes; he is a very good sort,"—but a summons to tea prevented further delineation of Mr Dallas's character. Tea over, Adair went away to dress, and the others went back to the chairs under the thorn-tree. The hot haze which had veiled sky and hills earlier in the day had gradually cleared away as the sun sank lower, and now its last level rays filled the glen with a flood of yellow light. Into this sunset splendour Adair stepped out, a tall white figure, from the dark hall.

"Let me see how your dress looks, my dear," said Mrs Earlstoun. "Take off your shawl for a moment; there is no fear of you getting cold to-night."

"Cold! no, I never get cold," said Adair, with rather an uncertain laugh. She hesitated a moment, and then let the soft white shawl she had wrapped round her drop from her shoulders, the quick blood dyeing her

cheeks and then leaving her paler than before. It would have been a perilous ordeal to many a girl who, under the more merciful gaslight, would have looked fair enough. The dress, too, was a trying one—the often talked-of “old white silk,” without lace or ornament of any kind to lighten or relieve it. The long plain skirt fell round her in straight heavy lines, and the square-cut sleeveless bodice revealed neck and arms that were neither snow-white nor milk-white nor marble-white, but the lovely living whiteness of pure health and perfect fairness, enhanced by the dead-white of her gown, which had neither gleam nor shimmer on its surface. For a second she stood in the full sunlight, like some breathing statue, save for the warm depths of her eyes and her ruddy crown of hair; then with a laugh she stooped for her shawl, saying, “The private view is at an end,—I hope you are all satisfied.” Douglas picked up the shawl and wrapped it round her again in silence. He looked pale under all his sunburn.

“I had almost forgotten for a moment you

were here, Douglas," said Mrs Earlstoun, "but you will excuse me. An old woman like me transfers her vanity to her children. They are all I have to think of now." Her voice trembled a little, and her eyes were moist as she watched the cousins leave the garden together. Agnes looked after them too, till the gate closed behind them: then she turned with a look of amusement to her mother.

"What would you think of that, mammy? It would be a splendid match for Adair, and oh, how furious Isabel and Aunt Evelyn would be! Oh, wouldn't it be fun! If it were only for that, I wish it would happen. No more old gowns and insolence then. My sister, Mrs Douglas Earlstoun—it would sound very well. They would be a very well-matched pair, too; they are both big and red-headed, though in different shades of the colour,"—with a little malicious laugh. "It is as well they evidently admire it in each other, as some people might not think it a beauty."

Mrs Earlstoun did not answer. As a rule, she was keen enough as to worldly interests,

and doubtless had had her own little schemes and visions during the evening; but she was stirred by another feeling than the match-making instinct which is supposed to reign supreme in every female breast. Shallow emotions may be genuine enough, what there is of them. Old memories revived, all that was best and purest in her nature was quickened for the moment at the thought of two young hearts trembling towards each other, her child standing on the brink of a new life. In Douglas she saw the ghost of her vanished youth and long-dead love, gay kindly Charlie Earlstoun, who had been so hot and eager a wooer, rather than the heir of Earlshope, the possible brilliant match for her penniless daughter.

Agnes, all uncomprehending, made her little gibing comments, and built her castles in the air with such rapidity that Adair, before she could have reached the bridge, was, in her sister's fancy, "wooded and married an' a'," and had returned from the Continent to a charming house in London, where she would, of course,

introduce her, Agnes, to all the delights of the season. She would in turn make some great marriage,—and so quickly did she proceed with her aerial architecture that she already saw herself taking precedence of Isabel, and metaphorically planting her foot on the neck of her enemies. It was rather a pity that those “cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces,” which seemed so glittering and solid in imagination, had to collapse with a crash at the incursion of Mirren, charging out to ask some small question of domestic economy, which, somewhat to the detriment of her dignity, Agnes found herself unable to answer.

CHAPTER VI.

THERE was but little said between the cousins during the short walk through the twilight woods. Adair refused to be tempted to linger as usual on the bridge, reminding Douglas that though she was dressed he was not, and that he had better not inaugurate his return by the enormity of being late for dinner. Douglas retorted that she had grown hopelessly prosaic in his absence, and that once upon a time she would not have missed such a sunset for all the dinners in the world. Adair gave a longing look to the western sky, over which the light cirrus cloud had risen up to the very zenith, the spreading feathery filaments tinged a faint rose against the fading blue; but she steeled her heart against its beauty, and against the siren voice of the

water, and the still subtler suggestions with which the evening air seemed to thrill. Echoes out of the past, hopes and fancies to which she had refused to listen, now came thronging round her, each with its own whisper of an impossible happiness that yet might not be wholly impossible after all. With this strange new sweetness came a tingling sense of shame that such thoughts should find a lodgment in her mind. Her cousin had come back, the same old frank friend. What was there in that to romance about, or why should she worry herself as to what might be said or thought because Douglas had chosen to spend so much of his first evening at the Old Manse? He was hungry, and had wanted something more substantial than the wafers of bread-and-butter which were being handed about the Earlshope drawing-room while he was making such a vigorous onslaught on her scones. Well, if he came again with such an appetite she would have to bake oftener, she said to herself, trying to combat this uneasy consciousness with a wholesome

dose of ridicule. But, in spite of herself, her sense of discomfort grew as she paced up and down the long dim drawing-room, which, as Douglas had prophesied, she had all to herself, no one having yet come down. The great room was only lighted by two shaded lamps, but the blinds were not yet drawn down over the long range of windows, and the grey evening light was still stronger than the lamps, which, instead of dispelling the shadows, seemed mere isolated specks of brightness. Adair walked swiftly up and down, for, thanks to the generous scale on which the house had been built, the room presented ample scope for free movement even in the twilight, instead of the tortuous labyrinths through which we have to thread our devious ways nowadays. Every now and again she was confronted with her reflection in one or other of the mirrors—a white spectral shape, with a shadowy face in which the eyes were like wells of blackness. She stopped at last and faced this haunting image, saying to herself, “I wonder people have so many mirrors, as

if one's own self were not worry enough, without being for ever presented with one's double in this way. Are you not ashamed of yourself, Adair Earlstoun?" addressing with mock solemnity the face in the mirror. "Why should you heed what any one may say or think? What wrong have you done?"

The door opened, and some one came in.

"Are you rehearsing for some theatricals with which you mean to surprise us, Miss Earlstoun? or is it possible that the good old fashion of soliloquy is not so wholly confined to the stage as we suppose?" said a strange voice, with a suspicion of amusement in it.

Adair started violently. "Was I really speaking aloud?" she asked anxiously, dread of having been overheard overpowering for the moment the fact that this dim presence was an utter stranger.

"This is still better. It shows how much unconscious dramatic instinct we all possess. But," hesitating, "I beg your pardon. I fear——"

"I am not Miss Earlstoun—not the one

whom you mean, at least," said Adair, trying to speak coolly, thankful for the twilight which concealed the confusion which she felt must be stamped in burning red on her face.

At that moment a servant came in, and moving noiselessly about, began lighting the lamps here and there about the room. Adair had faced round from the mirror, and dared not look into it again; she put up her hand in the vain hope of ascertaining *how* red she might be. How well off Isabel and Aggie were, and people who did not flush so easily as she did, she thought, when the light revealed to her a tall brown man, as she mentally characterised him.

"I see *now* how mistaken I was," he said, the slight emphasis and intonation giving point to the words. "As soon as I heard your voice distinctly, I knew it was not Miss Earlstoun."

"I am her cousin," said Adair. He had not overheard her then, she thought; or was he only saying that to try to put her at her ease? A very country cousin she must look.

It was absurd that at her age she should blush so for every trifle.

“Whose acquaintance I believe I was to have the pleasure of making this evening. May I not do so now, although there is no one here to stand sponsor and mutter the usual unintelligible formula. No doubt we should have to ask each other's names immediately afterwards. *Your* name, at least, I know; mine is Dallas. Ah, here is Mrs Earlstoun; we can have all the formalities now, if you still think it needful.”

“You have made friends already, I see,” said Mrs Earlstoun, coming forward with the soft sweep of silken draperies and the faint waft of perfume which, from her childhood, Adair had always associated with Aunt Evelyn's presence. “How fresh you look, child! it is well seen you do not keep late hours on the Rule Water,” she said, kindly enough.

Mrs Earlstoun was a beautiful woman, an adjective that is often much too liberally bestowed on the fleeting prettiness of soft

curves and brilliant bloom, which generally vanish when youth goes. Her beauty was an inherited right, as she was descended from a family which owed rank and wealth to the loveliness of an ancestress who had bartered her beauty for the strawberry-leaves, as many another fair woman did in the later Stuart days when a king was the wooer, and a royal bar-sinister no blot upon a scutcheon. The pure oval of her face, the delicately chiselled features, the radiant hazel eyes and chestnut hair, might all have found their counterpart in the portrait of that famed beauty who was willing to share in the royal affections along with Nell Gwynne and *la belle Querouaille*. As her sister-in-law had said, Mrs Earlstoun carried her age and the heavy stroke to her motherly pride and love lightly enough to all outward seeming, but she was far too wise to attempt the rivalry with younger women with which Mrs Charles charged her. Still, in her heavy velvet train, and with the high Medici collar framing her head and neck, she was, in Adair's eyes, as she had ever been,

the fairest and stateliest woman in the room, which was now filling fast. With her keen sense of beauty, Adair had always admired her aunt from the days when, with a child's frank innocent flattery, she had called her "the pitty 'ady," and when later she had idealised her as Mary Stuart or Marie Antoinette, or any one great and splendid and unfortunate. Why in those youthful dreamings she should always have associated with unhappiness one whose life had apparently been all unbroken prosperity, she could hardly have told. It was due perhaps to a slight peculiarity which Mrs Earlstoun shared with all the Daylesford men and women,—a little droop of the full white eyelids, which gave the eyes when in repose a look half sad, half cynical. Douglas's assertion that none of her children had inherited their mother's beauty was true enough, and Adair realised it afresh when Isabel, in a wonderful gown of pale fresh green, which, in spite of her lack of colour, she wore courageously and successfully, came up and spoke for a moment with Mrs

Earlstoun. Perhaps Isabel was conscious of it herself, for she almost immediately moved away. Whatever Isabel's communication may have been, it appeared to have a disturbing effect upon Mrs Earlstoun. She glanced keenly across at Adair, and then rapidly round the room at the various groups of her guests, who were standing about talking in that aimless desultory fashion with which people while away the few moments before dinner, as if each were reserving his or her conversational powers for the severe strain to which they would be subjected during the next hour. The women were casting rapid appraising looks at each other's gowns, reserving the more exhaustive study till the quarter of an hour of social slack-water after dinner. Involuntarily following her aunt's look, Adair saw that Douglas was amissing, and it was only when most of the company had paired off that he made his appearance. Adair fell to the lot of an elderly gentleman, a Sir Somebody, whose name, rapidly uttered by Isabel, she did not catch. From the

huddled-on aspect of his dress-clothes and his air of abstraction, she concluded that he was one of the archæologists in whom her uncle's soul delighted, or some literary or scientific light such as Mrs Earlstoun always endeavoured to include in her house-party. Seated at dinner, she had a better view of the guests—those at least ranged opposite to her—than in the drawing-room. Evidently she would have an opportunity of studying them unmolested, as her partner, though perhaps he could hardly be called silent, since he ate his soup somewhat audibly, apparently thought conversation unnecessary. Mr Dallas was on her other hand, but after a rapid self-gratulatory whisper as they sat down, he had been entirely engrossed by his own proper charge, a lively black-eyed lady who kept up an incessant stream of talk. For the time, however, Adair found quite sufficient amusement in watching the various faces. Dining at Earlshope had its compensations after all, she admitted; even the table, quivering with ferns and bright with the last dainty devices in flowers and

lights, was a pleasure to her, the low-toned voices and soft laughter a relief, after nine months' undiluted Rule Water gossip, though, after all, the talk here was chiefly gossip too, only the subjects were somewhat different. With an inward laugh at herself, she owned that she enjoyed the delicate food when for once she could do so with a mind at ease, instead of anxiously superintending even the most simple *plats*; for Mirren, if left to her own devices, displayed a destructive ingenuity which, as people say of the skill and adroitness of thieves and burglars, if better directed, might have raised her to high culinary rank. "Fortunately the very 'odd man' assigned me would evidently prefer not to be entertained, so I had better take such goods as the gods provide me, or I can provide for myself," she thought, looking round.

Beside Mrs Earlstoun was a very tall, shrivelled, lean old gentleman, with that beak-like cast of visage which, by common consent, has somehow come to be regarded as aristocratic. He showed curious little courtesies

and formalities of manner, which would have assorted better with the short-waisted swallow-tailed coat and voluminous neckcloth of a generation or so back than with modern evening dress. Lord Lorrimore, Adair concluded. Which was his wife, she wondered, looking down the row of faces, elderly, middle-aged, or young, in the vain attempt to find a mate for him. Could that possibly be she on Mr Earlstoun's right—a plump, comely young matron; the kind of woman who, when verging on early middle age, frankly avows her enjoyment of a good dinner, a glass of champagne, and a good story, if somewhat full-flavoured all the better? Of her host, a shy silent man at all times, she was taking no notice whatever, but was laughing immoderately at something her next neighbour, a very young man, was saying, her handsome shoulders quivering with mirth. Those round white shoulders were displayed with such liberality, that one ceases to wonder that a recent crusade against “undraped art” should have been but slackly supported. What the

eye has grown accustomed to in daily life ceases to be startling on the walls of an exhibition.

Douglas was far away up the table, and next him a girl somewhat of the type of Isabel, but much more decidedly handsome in a solid statuesque way, with

“ Glossy braids,
And even voice, and gorgeous eyeballs, calm
As her other jewels,”

quoted Adair to herself, watching the full well-cut lips shape out a monosyllable or two now and then. No ; the glossy braids at least were an anachronism nowadays, though they would have suited the young lady's slightly ponderous style better than the orthodox frizzled *toupée* she wore like every one else. Apparently she was not very amusing, Adair thought, perhaps with a little spice of mischievous satisfaction. Douglas was looking decidedly bored, and even a trifle sulky, in spite of what, from their rarity, ought to have been pearls of wisdom that dropped from his fair companion's lips.

Through a mist of maidenhair she could see Isabel's green dress, and by glimpses the face

of a little fair man who was talking to her in a languid, drawling fashion. His hand, when not occupied with knife or fork, was incessantly caressing a neat little straw-coloured moustache. Sir Claud Maxwell? queried Adair. Isabel seemed to be listening to him with more interest than her placid, self-complacent countenance often betrayed. What could they be talking about? The furnishing of Middleton? Hardly so soon. The revolutionary programme with which he meant to win over the Muirshiels "wabsters"? She could catch no word of Sir Claud's incessant little trickle of speech,—he spoke with a lisp, she was certain. Isabel's remarks, which were generally audible enough to benefit the whole company, seemed to be chiefly assent, so she could gather nothing from them. The exponent of Socialism did not look very formidable outwardly, she decided; and then beginning to feel a little out in the cold, she glanced at Sir Somebody next her, who, having worked through his fish, was studying the *menu* with absorbed interest. If he would not speak, ought she to begin

the attack? What could she begin with?—the weather, the district, the scenery, his recent journey, Melrose, Abbotsford, Scott? What would his vulnerable point be? or was he wholly given over to some 'ology or 'ism, of which only too likely she had never even heard the name? He looked up from his *menu* with a sigh, either of satisfaction at having made up his mind, or of regret that in making a choice something must be rejected. Now was her time! But just then Mr Dallas turned round, saying—

“What a variety of mental notes you must have been taking, Miss Earlstoun!”

“I have had ample opportunity, at least, have I not?” with a smile towards her silent neighbour, who was now dubiously inspecting the dish the servant was handing. “I do not object; it is not often I have an opportunity of observing so many of my kind. Average humanity on the Rule Water is not specially interesting; it does not, at least, afford much room for speculation. Now I have amused myself very well fancying who and what my

opposite neighbours are, I daresay I shall be still more amused by finding out how far I am right or wrong."

"Tell me your conclusions, and I shall let you know. What about that young man opposite, for example—the one who is talking to your cousin?"

"Do you expect me to make sport for the Philistines in that fashion? No; you shall give me a descriptive catalogue, and then I can laugh over my mistakes in private."

"I submit, although I feel I am losing a great deal of valuable information. I should have seen some of my acquaintances in quite a new light. Where shall I begin, then?"

"At your original starting-point if you like. However, I am so nearly certain that I am right in his case at least, that I do not mind telling you that I have concluded that he is Sir Claud Maxwell, who is shortly to enlighten the free and independent electors of Muirshiels, or very possibly be enlightened by them."

“How did you come to that conclusion, I should like to know?”

“By that instinct probably with which we are so liberally credited, as a sop perhaps for the doubts cast on our reasoning powers. His appearance, I admit, is hardly in keeping with the ferocious sentiments he is supposed to harbour, according to Isabel. He is certainly not my ideal of a Communist or a Socialist. I have always looked on those sort of people as at their best a set of loafers

‘Who have yearnings
For equal division of unequal earnings,’—

and who, at their worst, preach petroleum as a general panacea. Sir Claud hardly fits in with either conception. But then I am a dweller in the wilds, and have to take my definitions ready made.”

“Maxwell will stop short at the preaching, I fancy. I think no one would be more surprised than he if he were called on to practise his theories, and deal out his father’s fortune in shillings round, unless it might be the

average orthodox Christian if suddenly required to carry out some of the principles of his faith. Your definitions are accurate enough, Miss Earlstoun, but they don't quite cover every kind of Socialist. It is very funny certainly to hear Maxwell bleating out sentiments that might do credit to a Mirabeau, but it is rather maddening to those who know something of the reality of what are merely stock phrases to him. When one has once seen something of the gulf of hopelessness and helplessness into which men and women are sinking every day, into which thousands are born without the faintest chance of ever rising out of it——"

"Dear me, Mr Dallas, what on earth are you in such earnest about? How did you contrive to get into such depths at dinner?" broke in the black-eyed lady, who, having finished her *entrée* and made a fruitless incursion into her neighbour's territory, did not at all approve of this poaching on her own manor. "I think I caught the word 'gulf.' That is a word I always tremble for. Don't,

for pity's sake, bring up those dreadful social questions here! Had you been Sir Claud, I might have thought you were rehearsing your speech. I hope he may get as sympathetic listeners. I did not know Miss Earlstoun cared much for politics, and I suppose he can talk nothing else just now," with a significant smile across the table.

Mr Dallas laughed,—the sudden depth and fervour vanished from voice and eyes. "I don't know how we reached 'the gulf,' Mrs Milbrooke. My intentions were innocent enough, I can assure you. I was merely giving Miss Earlstoun an account of our friends opposite, or meant to do it, and began with Sir Claud. Scarcely a subject suggestive of 'depths,' is it? But you could give a far better catalogue than I." If Mr Dallas suggested this for his own private ends, or merely with the benevolent intention of rescuing Adair from silence and Sir Andrew Ferrier, he was not successful. Mrs Milbrooke had no wish to turn the duet, to which she had a legitimate right, into a trio, especially when

the proverbially obnoxious third party was this strikingly handsome girl. Her black eyes had that beady look such as only very dark eyes can assume, as she fixed them about an inch beyond Adair.

“I am afraid everybody here is quite too well known for there to be any fun even in picking them to pieces. What a comfort it would be if one could occasionally meet some one new in a country house—it is always the same old set; but I suppose there is no alternative between that and being cast away amongst natives, friendly or unfriendly. I do not know which are the worse; from all which perils,” with a laugh and a shiver, “good Lord deliver us!”

“You have a fine example of the Silurian formation here, Miss—ah—Johnston,” suddenly said Sir Andrew, apparently only now awakening to the fact that it was part of the duty of man at a dinner-table to talk.

“Yes,” said Adair, somewhat blankly, and looking vaguely round as if in search of the object which had awakened Sir Andrew’s at-

tention, and caused his unexpected lapse into speech. "Oh, the hills, of course; yes, I think I have heard so, but I am afraid I know very little of geology."

Not a very promising beginning, but Sir Andrew seemed possessed of a more than missionary zeal in his determination to enlighten her. For the rest of dinner Adair was dimly conscious of being pelted by an endless succession of hard words and names, through which she heard the "do you remember" talk in which Mrs Milbrooke kept Mr Dallas engaged, while flying half-heard jests and light snatches of laughter round the table mingled with the "schist, greywacke, tertiary formations, Laurentian rocks," with which she felt as if she were being physically pounded. Douglas was evidently finding his Juno more interesting now. When does a man's ill-humour or disappointment not evaporate in the course of an excellent dinner? Lady Lorrimore was in such fits of laughter, and was denouncing her youthful entertainer as a "naughty wicked wretch" with such vehemence, that Mrs Earls-

toun had to repeat the signal for rising before she could attract her attention. "You must tell me the rest of it by-and-by—I am dying to hear all about it," she said, rising and throwing a coquettish backward glance over the ample snowy slope of shoulder. Adair heaved a sigh of relief as she paced slowly out in the wake of Mrs Milbrooke's peach-coloured train. The looker-on might see most of the game, but on the whole it would be livelier to have some share in it. In the drawing-room there would be at least some chance of escape from further scientific information.

CHAPTER VII.

“ELFIE!” exclaimed Adair in surprise, as a tall, slim white figure rose out of a dim corner of the drawing-room, and came forward with hesitating tremulous steps to meet her. “When did you come? You must have been very lonely waiting here.”

“No; Clara has been talking to me.”

“Exactly, Adair; or talking at her would perhaps be nearer the truth. It is just as well I have no objection to the sound of my own voice, for one gets no help from Elfie. I’ll leave her with you; perhaps you can convince her that we don’t mean to do anything alarming to her,”—and Miss Clara sailed away with as good an imitation of Isabel’s manner as her short white frock and fifteen-year-old figure would permit.

"Aunt Evelyn sent over for me just after you had gone," said Elfie, when Adair had established her again in a sheltered nook, screened by a group of palms.

"Poor Aggie! was she very much disappointed?" said Adair, with an involuntary smile. "If only she knew what a delightful geological lecture she has missed. You won't be afraid to play, dear, if Aunt Evelyn asks you by-and-by?"

"Not if you will come with me," sliding a cold trembling hand into Adair's.

"Who is the girl in white, over there by the window?" asked Lady Lorrimore very audibly, composing herself deliberately meantime for a nap.

"Oh, they are cousins of ours. They live here, and of course it is a little change for them to come here in an evening," said Isabel carelessly.

"Ah! I understand. Not a bad-looking girl, the elder one. But, really, there should be a law against younger brothers and cousins, and dependants of that sort, with the state

that land is in nowadays. I tell Lord Lorimore there will be positively nothing left for ourselves ; he is always saddling himself afresh with some cousin or sister or aunt. Could I have another cushion, I wonder ? A thousand thanks. My poor back, you know."

"That white gown yet, Adair ?" said Isabel, sauntering up after a time. "Really you have kept it well. I wish you could give Fanchette a hint. I do think she tumbles up my things to get the reversion of them all the sooner. You don't think it is just rather courageously plain ? It is wonderful how a trifle of lace or trimming of some sort smartens up an old frock, but of course you are not in the way of seeing much here. You and Sir Andrew seemed to hit it off wonderfully at dinner ; I never heard him talk so much before. He is quite worth thinking of, I assure you, Adair. He makes any amount by his books, I believe, although goodness knows who reads them, and he is asked everywhere."

"We are only upon geological terms as yet," said Adair with a laugh, "and I am

afraid I am not sufficiently pre-Adamite to interest him permanently."

"What do you think of Lady Hermione? That is she standing by the piano. She generally prefers to stand, I notice: there is perhaps a trifle too much pose in her attitudes, but she is very handsome, don't you think? Douglas took her in to dinner, you would see," with a suggestive little smile. "I fancy the details of the treaty will be settled here. Her people would like it, her stepmother especially, and I fancy the high contracting parties themselves have no objections. It would be a very suitable arrangement, and it is time Douglas was settling down. Mother wants Elfie to play by-and-by. I don't know if any one here is very musical, but her playing is so odd, it will be something out of the way at least, and help to pass the time a little. I told Wilson to get some one to blow for her. Would you mind seeing if he has done so, and if everything is right?"

Douglas was not the only one who, on coming in a few moments later, cast a quick dis-

appointed glance round the room. Lady Hermione looked up with a half-expectant smile, pushing aside the prints she had been supposed to be studying, and falling into another attitude, of which the grace was, as Isabel had suggested, perhaps a trifle studied. Her stepmother sat up briskly among her cushions and beckoned little Lord Romer to her. Sir Claud made what his lordship called "a bee-line" for Isabel, seated in the full lamp-light with a comfortable chair suggestively vacant beside her. "That's a gone case," said Lord Romer mournfully; "when a girl like that makes up her mind, the fellow has no chance. Maxwell is done for, poor chap. I am devoutly thankful she did not set her young affections upon me."

"What is that? Is it possible it is the old organ? Who is playing it?" asked Douglas, as a sudden burst of music dying off into fitful whisperings thrilled the air, now soaring up fresh, ecstatic, hopeful, like a carolling lark, then drooping down, down, down, like some broken-winged bird struggling

in vain against the cruel beating of the storm. He was leaning on the piano, keeping up some semblance of talk with Lady Hermione, who had just been singing, with no great amount of voice and less expression, one of the modern school of ballads. In the opening verse some ragged orphan or orphans, as the case may be, peep into some convenient cathedral, or hear the organ-tones and the voice of prayer amid the storm and rain without, or possibly the call of the watchman in the silent street, and, after whatever variations the skill of the composer can suggest, pass away opportunely and peacefully into the care of the angels amid crashing chords at the close of the third. The talk, in the immediate neighbourhood of the piano at least, had been hushed in duty bound, as Lady Hermione, in a final piercing note, landed her waifs safe beyond the clouds; and after the perfunctory "Thank you, so much," had broken out with renewed vigour, when it was hushed again by this strange new voice, for voice it seemed to be.

"Who is it, Isabel?" asked Douglas again,

finding his efforts to spin out the dwindling thread of talk decidedly exhausting.

“Who is it, Miss Earlstoun?” chimed in Lady Hermione, as the waves of sound ebbed and flowed. “You have prepared quite a surprise for us,—it is quite delightfully weird. Positively it makes me shiver. The lights ought to be burning blue, and all that sort of thing, to be quite in keeping with it. It is like—what do the Irish people call it?—that goes wailing about the windows when any misfortune is going to happen.”

“Have we set up a banshee, Isabel, and does it play the organ?” asked Douglas.

Isabel smiled superior, accepting all the surprise and interest which this new “effect” had awakened as merely her due.

“It is very odd indeed,” murmured Sir Claud.

“It is only a little cousin of ours, Lady Hermione,” said Isabel, “who has developed quite a curious talent for music. She is an odd shy little thing; you would only frighten her, I am afraid, if you went into the hall:

besides, it sounds all the better at a little distance."

"You don't mean to say Elfie plays like that!" ejaculated Douglas in amazement. "Wherever did she pick it up?"

"Evolved it from her inner consciousness, I think, whatever that may be exactly. Really, Douglas," rather sharply, "I assure you, you will only stop her if you go out."

"I do not think she will object to me—I am not a stranger," said Douglas hastily, cutting short Isabel's remonstrances. Where Elfie was, Adair was pretty sure to be, and surely he had done duty enough for one night, he said to himself, as he made his escape.

The hall at Earlshope was not so much used, as is often the case, as a general gathering-place. It was too vast, too gloomy, too solemn. Under the lofty vaulted roof, and in the many-coloured twilight of the stained-glass windows, to drink tea, and to carry on ordinary jesting talk, seemed almost as much out of place as picnicing in the nave of a cathedral. "It is horribly like church—I could never venture to

laugh here," Lady Lorrimore had exclaimed on her first entrance. Although at night this ecclesiastical effect, which Lady Lorrimore declared to be so depressing, was somewhat lessened by the glow of the fire that was welcome even in August, and one or two standard lamps that drove the shadows into the pillared recesses and up into the high arch above, the hall was usually abandoned to stray couples wholly given over to flirtation. To-night, however, much to Douglas's disgust, one after another stole out, in spite of Isabel's remonstrances, to see the musician who was waking not only the soul of the organ, but touching long-silent chords in their own hearts. A deeper hush fell on the little group as each instinctively drew nearer and nearer the organ. Douglas leaned against the frame, apparently watching the slender hands wandering among the old yellow keys, a heavy cloud in his grey eyes. Adair stood on the other side, the light from a swinging lamp above falling on her face and hair, while the gilded organ-pipes formed a background to her tall

figure, like those of fretted gold in old Byzantine pictures. To Dallas it seemed no inapt realisation of the old legend of St Cecilia. The rapt intensity of the pale youthful face of the player, charged with emotions for which she could find no utterance, inarticulate even to herself, might well represent the ecstatic saint; and the tall white form, crowned with bright hair, standing by her, the celestial visitor, drawn downwards by those constraining chords. Something in the attitude and face of the girl, as unconscious for the moment as her sister, in the grave protecting sweetness of the eyes fixed on Elfie, strengthened the fancy. A guardian angel!—how Adair would have laughed could she have read the earnest gaze of those dark eyes.

One long, sighing, final note, and Elfie took her hands off the keys. Every one started, drew a long breath, and looked round as if waking from a dream.

“Where did you learn to play like that, child?” said Dallas, rather abruptly.

“I don’t know—it just seems to come,” said

Elfie, lifting her wide mournful gaze to his face. In her eyes the rapture still lingered; then, like a lamp dying out, the light left her face, her whole figure drooped, and she turned to Adair, saying like a child, "I am so tired."

"No wonder," said Adair caressingly; "you have been away wandering in some strange region, no wonder you are tired when you come back. I think,"—turning to Douglas,— "we shall go home now, if you will make our excuses to Aunt Evelyn. I need not subject Elfie to the ordeal of walking up the drawing-room to say good night," with a smile.

"Very well," said Douglas briefly; "can I get your wraps or things?"

"Your sister has a most singular gift, Miss Earlstoun,—or may I call you by your own name? I always associate Miss Earlstoun with your cousin," said Dallas, sitting down and sounding a stray chord or two on the organ. He was watching Elfie while he spoke. She was like some somnambulist suddenly aroused; her real life seemed to be in the visionary world where, as Adair said, she had been stray-

ing: it was common life that was strange to her. He was struck by the singular look of aloofness about her, as she leaned on Adair's shoulder, with the cloud of ashen-brown hair falling round her face, and her eyelids half closed.

"Every one calls me Miss Adair. Miss Earlstoun is sacred to Isabel. I should never aspire to such a distinction," said Adair, brightly; any recognition of Elfie was a delight to her. "It is really a gift, as you say," she went on eagerly. "As Elfie says, 'It just seems to come.' No one ever taught her. I did what I could,—tried to show her the difference between a crotchet and a quaver—I am afraid that was the most of it; and yet there is nothing that stirs me like Elfie's playing. But of course I have heard so little music," she added humbly. "You play yourself?"

"A little,—that is the stock answer, is it not? But as to my doings in that and other directions, it is true enough," said Dallas, with a laugh. "You are right, though, as to your sister's playing; intuition is often

the best guide. I have heard plenty of music of one sort and another, but Miss Elfie has unlocked a new world to me to-night."

The girl looked at him with a kind of shy wondering gratitude. No one but Adair had ever praised her before. Adair flushed with pleasure. "Then you do not think she has suffered much from want of training? This is such an out-of-the-way place, and I am not at all musical."

"Miss Elfie does not need training, any more than a lark or a nightingale. But I should have pronounced you musical," looking up into the expressive face.

"I cannot play or sing well enough for my own pleasure or any other body's, but so far as enjoyment goes, I am musical enough; indeed enjoyment is hardly the word,—it is such a keen delight that it is almost painful sometimes, the feeling one has on some calm lovely evening, when the beauty grows almost oppressive. I can't express it, but you know what I mean. I sometimes wonder how I should feel if I

ever heard really great music such as one reads of. I am afraid I should be like some one crazy or intoxicated."

"What a world you have before you! How I envy you! You make me wish that I had never heard Beethoven, or since I can't get back my own first impressions, that I could hear yours. I should like to be with you when you hear some great singer or orchestra for the first time."

"I am afraid, like the Peri, I am more likely to remain sighing outside of that Paradise," laughed Adair. "The only music recognised on the Rule Water is the singing in the church on Sundays, though the sounds produced are not particularly musical, it must be confessed."

"You live here always—all the year?" asked Dallas, in a slightly puzzled tone.

"Impossible as it must be to realise it, we do live here 'always—all the year,'—or exist rather. I should be inclined to keep the word *live* for something more vivid than the round of eating and sleeping, and the

small beer in general, which fills up so much of one's days. Sometimes I feel as if I had only really been alive when Elfie is playing, or when I have been up on the Camp, with the wind blowing round me, and all the hills and glens spreading below. I think no place on earth could ever be so dear to me as my own hills, but I have often watched the white puff of steam away down at the end of the glen, and wished it were carrying me away somewhere — anywhere, to some kind of work or life that would occupy the whole of me."

“ ‘ One crowded hour of glorious life,
Is worth an age without a name ’

is your creed, then ?" said Dallas, with a smile, looking at her with growing interest. "I am not a prophet, but I think you will find your life-work elsewhere than on the Rule Water. God knows, there is plenty of work to be done," he said in an undertone.

Adair was silent. She was not usually afflicted with self-consciousness, but all at

once she realised that she had been talking with unwonted openness to one who was, after all, a stranger to her.

“I think Douglas must have forgotten us,” she said, looking round rather uneasily.

Dallas possibly divined her feeling, for he struck a chord or two on the organ, and then began the familiar Tannhäuser overture, which was a new revelation, however, to both his hearers, who were soon swept away on the flood of sound from every thought of self. Elfie, who had been sitting silent and abstracted while they talked, now drew herself erect like some tall pliant reed. Her breath quickened, her whole frame seemed to expand, as the solemn strains of the Pilgrim’s Chant gave place to the intoxicating revels of the Venusberg, the roseate mists of enchantment, and the maddening whirl of the Bacchantes in their brief triumph;—the age-long conflict between good and evil fought out anew in those massive harmonies to the mighty triumphant close.

“It is you who can open a new world,” she

said breathlessly, when he ceased. Adair's look was thanks enough.

"Elfie, child, I am afraid this is too much excitement for you," she said, a little anxiously, as Douglas came hurrying up, followed by a maid with Adair's white wraps and a long dark cloak for Elfie.

"You would think I was never coming back, I fear, but I have had no end of a hunt," putting Adair's shawl round her.

"Please, sir," said the girl, curtseying, "Mr Wilson is waiting to go with the ladies—Miss Earlstoun told him to do so."

"Tell him he need not trouble. I am going," said Douglas.

Dallas threw Elfie's cloak round her, and helped her to draw the hood over her hair. He thought she looked more strangely picturesque than ever, with the close, dark, nun-like hood encircling her face.

"May I not come too?" he said, as Elfie timidly extended her hand, with some faltered word of thanks. Douglas muttered something not very graciously, and planted himself de-

terminatedly by Adair's side as they went out into the soft summer darkness. The path leading towards the bridge was narrow, and Dallas perforce fell behind with Elfie. There was no moonlight yet, but the blueish transparency of the sky above the Camp told that the moon was already shining, and would soon climb above the hills.

"What is Mr Dallas?" asked Adair, as soon as the voices behind faded away a little. "He began to talk at dinner in an odd earnest way, *apropos* of Sir Claud and his Socialism, but Mrs Milbrooke, I think her name is, interrupted him. Probably it is old-fashioned prejudice, but I have always looked on a man who played as a dilettante sort of being who was not likely to trouble himself about the poor or such matters."

"What is Dallas? Something of everything, I think. Yes; I used to consider a musical man as a sort of hybrid too, but things have changed while I have been out of the world. He is a very good fellow, but rather given to sudden crazes, I should think.

Just now he has got a crank about the poor, and the East End, and all the rest of it—proposes to elevate the masses by teaching them to hammer iron and hack wood in their various garrets. Home industry, I think they call it. Better give them homes first, I should say, or, what would please them best, a shilling for so many ‘goes’ of gin. That is the elevation they would prefer. I don’t know how he was persuaded to tear himself away from town, and his classes and clubs, and goodness knows what beside. I don’t know what he expects is to come out of it all, but it seems to me he is only wasting his time and his talents, of which he is said to have no end; but as to that, I am afraid I am like one of the Georges of immortal memory, where ‘bainting and boetry’ and such matters are concerned.”

Douglas might perhaps have described his friend’s interests more sympathetically had it not been for the recollection of Adair’s face while still under the spell of Dallas’s music; neither had he looked forward to

this walk under the darkling trees only to hear her dilate on Mr Dallas's powers and his admiration of Elfie's playing, for which she seemed as grateful, Douglas said to himself, as if the fellow had given her a kingdom. She was close beside him: in the darkness she had stumbled slightly, and he had drawn her hand through his arm, and Adair, usually so independent, had let it remain there. He could not see her face in the gloom,—nothing but the dim white shape moving beside him; but the well-remembered voice and the low laugh were in his ears, the consciousness of her presence seemed to fill the summer night and to wrap him round, the light pressure of her hand was on his arm, and yet they were further apart than when a world of seas had tossed between them. Why should she not talk of Dallas? What right had he to keep Dallas or any other from her side? Adair, finding that her remarks were barely answered, soon dropped into silence too. At the bridge they paused, waiting for the

others. Adair gently drew her hand away, and moved a little apart. Douglas let her do so, as though he did not observe it. From the blackness of the woods they could hear the two voices mingling together and drawing nearer.

"Why," said Adair, with a laugh, "is it possible that that is Elfie talking in that way? Mr Dallas must have bewitched her."

"I hope it is only Elfie," said Douglas, under his breath.

"Miss Elfie has been giving me quite a family history," said Dallas, as they went slowly up the hill from the bridge together.

"Has she, indeed? I am afraid she must have drawn upon her imagination then. If those who have no history are supposed to be happy, we ought to be among the blessed of the earth, I should think," said Adair, trying to speak lightly. "I was wondering what made you so unusually eloquent, Elfie; what did you find to say?"

"I was speaking about you," said Elfie simply.

“About me ! An interesting subject, truly.” Adair laughed in spite of herself. “This grows alarming. What amount of unlawful information have you been obtaining, Mr Dallas ? Never mind ; I shall find out from Elfie, and give you a corrected version, if necessary. But you have surely been sadly in want of a topic.”

They had paused at the gate in the high wall. Just then the moon overtopped the hill, and flooded the glen with white light, against which every shadow was carved out black and clear. The two young men carried away with them the picture of Adair’s face spiritualised in the moonlight, a smile on her lips, and Elfie in her straight black cloak clinging to her like her shadow.

Back at the bridge, Douglas leaned his arms on the rail while Dallas lit a cigar. It was true, as Elfie had said, that they had spoken chiefly of Adair, and he had been strangely touched by her simple talk, and by the strong bond of love between the sisters—all the more so as he had no near ties of his own, and such

family relationships as he was familiar with were rather of the conventional order. His keen artistic sense was struck by the contrast between the two girls—the warm life and noble grace of the elder, and Elfie's shadowy haunting charm. What was that strange charm? Was it only some fleeting indefinable expression, giving a visionary beauty to her very fragility? The girl was rather a puzzle altogether. How those wistful clouded eyes of hers had thrilled him at times, and again at others her face had seemed merely childish and almost vacant. So with her talk: flashes of weird insight were followed by a strange empty little laugh that struck a chill through him somehow, and which he had noticed once during the evening had brought a shadow over Adair's face. Was the soul only dormant, waiting for some strong emotion to call it forth, as music did for a time? Such a nature would be an interesting study.

Something of this he began to say, but Douglas was in no mood for talk, least of all

when it referred to Adair. By-and-by Dallas strolled away, saying with a laugh, "I shall leave you to your meditations, Earlstoun. If you are determined to stand on the bridge at midnight, I shall let you do it in peace." He had castles of his own to build as he made his way through the wood, where here and there a white jet of moonlight now pierced the dark leafy fretwork above.

Left alone, Douglas stood looking down into the black hurrying waters; only the crest of some ripple showed a steel-like glint now and then as it glanced into the light. All day long the tumult had been growing within him, since he had seen that white figure seated on the bridge, since the moment he had looked into those deep-brown eyes again. So that was Adair! he had seen her again—his life-long love. He knew it now, knew it but too well, when it was too late. All through those long years of absence, of semi-forgetfulness at times, her face had never been wholly absent from his heart; and now at her smile, at the sound of her voice, the

old love leapt into flame—his whole being rose up to greet her. What a fair and gracious woman she had grown, but not for him—not for him! A passing fancy, a hot gust of unworthy passion, a few hasty words, had raised a barrier between him and every hope of happiness, every chance of a purer, higher life. Why had he not spoken out all that was in his hot young heart that summer night long ago?—when he might perhaps have carried away with him Adair's promise, Adair's love, as a talisman that would have kept his heart pure for her, and for her alone. Unconsciously he put out his hand along the rough railing, as if half expecting to clasp that of his girl-love. It might have been, if only his blundering boyish tongue could have spoken out,—if only he had not let himself be persuaded to linger in London till a brief temptation had him full in its grasp. Had he not been a madman, a blind senseless fool, he might have returned, God help him! to have rekindled the love-light in those dear eyes, to have claimed his love, his wife, instead

of—— And with something between a groan and a curse, the young man let his head fall on his folded arms, and stood motionless, the dark waters speeding on their way beneath his feet, and the chill moonlight creeping nearer and nearer, till it silvered the fair bowed head.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE post-bag was brought to Earlshope about ten o'clock, and such of the party as assembled to breakfast had their letters dealt out to them then. The other dwellers in the glen had to wait until such time in the afternoon as it might suit the lumbering lad charged with her Majesty's mails for the Rule Water, and termed with singular inappropriateness "the runner," to make his way up the Water with them from the station. As everybody was at liberty to read their letters, the plan had at least the advantage of saving the trouble of conversation or supplying subjects for it; but on the other hand it was, as Lord Romer said, "a most objectionable arrangement in an otherwise well-conducted house." Every one knew what a man's letters were, as

a rule, and for his part he found it decidedly unpleasant to have epistles *from*, not *to*, the Hebrews, staring him in the face in public. Each one took a hasty glance over his separate pile; the oblong blue envelopes were generally pocketed for private perusal, while the thick crested ones, the invitations, gossiping notes, and so on, were opened and discussed ostentatiously enough sometimes.

One morning, some days later, coming in somewhat after the others, Douglas found the usual little heap awaiting him, and began turning them over, while Lady Lorrimore was entertaining the company with a somewhat *risqué* anecdote which some "frightfully funny wretch" of her varied acquaintance had forwarded to her.

"That looks a very familiar writing," she said suddenly, looking at a letter at which Douglas had paused involuntarily.

"Perhaps," he said, as carelessly as he could. "There is not very much originality, as a rule, in feminine handwriting, however those who read character by writing may account for it.

In the days of my youth ladies all wrote with a pin ; nowadays you seem to have taken to a brush and paint-pot. I cannot imagine, at least, that any ordinary pen could convey so much ink on to paper."

"Oh, we are not such sheep as all that," protested Lady Lorrimore. "See there, and there"—producing various specimens, from the niggles to the sprawl ; "and Hermione's writing is as different from mine as it could be."

"So I could imagine," interpolated Douglas, rather dryly.

"May I see it ?" holding out a plump hand.

"Certainly, if you are interested in it, but I can't say I see anything remarkable about it."

"Well, I consider it most original," turning the letter over curiously ; "but that is just the way with you men : you won't take the trouble to observe the difference in our writing, or ourselves either. It saves trouble to lump us all together, and then sneer at us as unoriginal. This is not at all common writing."

“Shall we pass it round the table and get the general opinion?” asked Douglas coolly, fulminating an inward anathema meantime.

“No, I shall not subject you or it to such an ordeal. C. S. I. is the monogram, or C. I. S.? Yes, that must be it. Well, I won’t keep it from you any longer,—you must be dying to know what Cis has to say.”

After which exhibition of tact, Lady Lorri-more returned once more to her own correspondence.

Whether Douglas was dying to read the letter or not, he let it lie unopened along with the others till breakfast was over, when he crammed them all into his pocket and went out. He turned up the water-side, walking rapidly in the fresh morning sunlight; but gradually his steps became slower, and at last, throwing himself down among the bracken, he drew out the letter and sat looking at it. He had honestly striven during the past week to keep out of Adair’s way. He had become Sir Claud’s most zealous canvasser, and was for ever driving him into Muirshiels or about the

country, although, as Sir Claud plaintively said, "Earlstoun would air his old-fashioned prejudices, and it made it very awkward for him, indeed positively absurd at times, to state his platform afterwards. The people positively thought he was making fun of them." Whereupon Douglas would assert that it was quite impossible for any one to entertain such an opinion of him, and promise to leave him a free field in the next farmhouse or woollen factory they might visit. There were days when, riding among the old familiar hills and glens and "hopes," visiting among the scattered farmhouses where "Master Douglas" received as warm a welcome as those hard-headed undemonstrative Scotch country folk could bestow, and where for his sake "the English laud" was tolerated, something of the old sense of wellbeing would return to him. Among those well-remembered scenes, the recent past was like a dream. Real grief or trouble he had never known before, and to his sanguine nature it seemed at such times wildly impossible that one mis-

take, one brief folly, should have ruined his life. Where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also, and his feet are only too likely to follow his heart. Spite of honour, of prudence, of his resolves, he had found himself more than once at the Old Manse, where Aunt Aggie was always ready to receive him with open arms, and where the low dark rooms and old-fashioned garden were associated with so many far-away happy days. When a sense of the reality would come over him like a desolating gust, he would excuse those visits to himself with the odd unconscious sophistry we all use: he did not go alone—Dallas or some one was always with him; Aunt Agnes liked a little attention, and the poor little woman did not often get it; he never spoke with Adair alone. All of which was perfectly true, but words are not the only language by which hearts can communicate. His natural kindliness of disposition gave his manner to women a sort of protecting tenderness; and his kindness to her mother, the patience with which he would listen to long involved stories

of "your poor Uncle Charlie," were very sweet and delightful to Adair, and Douglas got his reward in the softening of her warm brown eyes when they met his own. Dallas, who was his most frequent companion, thought too that there was an added charm about the girl in her own home: the little hardness of manner or slight bitterness of tone that to a keen sympathetic observer were sometimes noticeable at Earlshope vanished here. The two young men had spent more than one long afternoon in the old orchard, while the Rule rippled and glittered by, in that easy familiar talk in which intimacy grows so fast. Dallas usually directed most of his talk to Elfie, for the double pleasure of drawing some quaint unexpected reply from her, and seeing the quick pleased look of gratitude on Adair's face.

Any one who had seen Douglas Earlstoun the day before under the gnarled old trees, sharing in the friendly foolish little jests and happy idle laughter that come so readily on a lazy summer afternoon, would hardly have

recognised him in the young man sitting with lowering brow and compressed lips and a look in his blue-grey eyes that was not pleasant to see. At last, with an odd hard laugh, he tore the letter open. It was not very long. The bold vigorous writing which had attracted Lady Lorrimore's curiosity soon filled up the small sheet of notepaper, the last fashionable eccentricity in colour and roughness.

“MY DEAR BOY,—What a philosophic and forbearing pair of lovers we are, to be sure! Still, I will acknowledge that a wee bit of a note would seem only a proper attention from you now. I have allowed plenty of time for your raptures on returning to the cradle of your ancestors to subside, have I not? I hear you have a charming party, and that you are very much *aux petits soins* with Lady Hermione Winstanley. Don't be alarmed, however,—I am not in the least jealous. I think I have reason to know that those ox-eyed divinities are not in your line, eh?

“Have you broken *our* news to the Pater

and Mater, and are they horribly disgusted and angry at poor me? As I suppose the first outpouring of the vials of wrath is over by this time, I have a little proposal to make. You see I am at Canonbie, which is not very far from Earlshope. Would Mrs Earlstoun take me in for a few days? I should like to know her, and see the cradle of the race, etc., not to speak of a certain naughty careless boy of my acquaintance. If she is obdurate, I shall get Lady Warriston to drive me over and storm the citadel in person. When I have set my heart on anything, I always do it. Perhaps it is very vain of me, but I think if she saw me she might look rather more kindly on your little

Cis."

Douglas sat absolutely still, looking straight before him at the opposite hillside. A flock of sheep were moving along it, passing one by one through a gap in a dry-stone wall. He stared at them as though his very life depended on his counting them as they went through. On they came in long procession,

each giving a little spring as they crossed the wall. When the last had passed, as if some spell were broken he suddenly started to his feet, and walked rapidly homewards. As he passed the stables, Lord Romer came lounging out, cigar in mouth.

“I say, Earlstoun, you don’t look very chirpy,” he said. “So the fair Cis writes to you, eh? That was a fine disclosure of Mother Lorrimore’s this morning. You have the most confounded luck, to be sure, to be so high in a certain lady’s good graces, and to have the pretty cousin to fill up the time here. Perhaps it is the difficulty of reconciling conflicting claims that is clouding your manly brow? There are drawbacks to everything, to be sure, in this imperfect world. By the by, Maxwell is seeking you sorrowing. He wants you to take him to some unpronounceable place—my Saxon tongue, at least, will not attempt it rashly.”

“What were you saying, Romer?” said Douglas, pulling himself together. “You would be endurable if you did not think it

needful always to try to be funny. You should save it up for Lady Lorrimore—it seems to amuse her. If you come across Maxwell, tell him he might let me off for a day. He can't expect everybody's zeal to be as burning as his, especially as I don't altogether see the beauty of setting all the beggars in creation on horseback. There are quite enough of them prancing round already."

Douglas went to Mrs Earlstoun's morning-room, where he found her writing rapidly, a little pile of notes gradually growing on the table before her.

"Are you very busy, mother? Can you spare me a moment?" he asked.

"Will you let me finish this note, dear?" looking up with a smile. "I want to get them off at once. Really, I think I must set up a secretary. I think I have invited the half of Muirshiels to dinner this morning."

"Could no one help you? I don't see why we should be bothered with Sir Claud and his affairs to the extent we are."

"Don't you?" laughed Mrs Earlstoun; "it

is pretty evident, I think. However, let me finish my letters, like a dear boy, and we shall discuss that or anything you please afterwards."

Douglas went to the deep-set narrow window. The morning-room was on the side of the house nearest the hills, which sloped up so steeply from the strip of lawn that only a narrow streak of sky was visible far away up above the jagged belt of fir-trees that crested the hills. Down a rugged little ravine a tiny stream leapt in white foam into a deep circular basin, from which it rose again in a tall pillar of spray. Douglas watched the tossing waters of the fountain, the fixed set look gathering again on his face, till Mrs Earlstoun said with a laugh—

"You are very much in my light, Douglas. I think you forget what a height you are."

He started, shifted his position with an absent word of apology, and stood looking from his mother—her graceful head with its white filmy morning-cap bent over her writing, a half-smile on her lips—to the por-

trait above the mantelpiece. There was no mistaking the likeness between mother and son. The young man's face in the picture was a singularly beautiful one, though such a word always seems out of place when applied to a man; but it was marred by a somewhat effeminate look, and by the exaggerated droop of the eyelids, which gave it a cold, cynical expression. Two years ago Maurice Earlstoun had been found dead in his rooms. An overdose of laudanum—he had been out of health, suffering from sleeplessness, the doctors said. Such a charming young man! a little reckless, perhaps, but a good deal was to be excused to young fellows like him: such a pity people would meddle with opiates, said the good-natured. But there were others who said openly that it was deliberate suicide, and that there were only too good reasons for the young man flinging his life away. Douglas had been far away at that miserable time, but he had come home to find his father a broken old man, and to see silver threads that had not been there before in his mother's auburn hair.

It was his turn to wound her now, he thought bitterly enough; since it must be, if she would only stop writing and let him get it over! As a child, Douglas had adored his beautiful mother. His earliest recollection of her was of a radiant vision bending over his little crib at night, the splendour of silk, and lace, and jewels only half seen by sleepy little eyes. Mrs Earlstoun always made a point, as she said, of seeing her children before she went out in the evening, and no doubt thought that in doing so she had fulfilled the whole duty of motherhood. In those days he had always associated her with the pictures of angels that Nursie showed them in the big Bible and the 'Pilgrim's Progress' on Sundays. As he grew older he soon divined, with a child's quick instinct, that his brother Maurice filled all his mother's heart. In a great house parents and children may be all but strangers to each other. He was soon, of course, sent to school—and boys at home for the holidays are, as every one knows, generally a nuisance to their elders; though Mrs Earlstoun was always kind,

always interested in his scrapes or his pleasures when she had any time to hear about them. Still, in spite of the little actual intercourse between them, in spite of his long absence, Douglas had retained much of his child's freshness of heart; and while he waited in the silence, broken only by the swift even flow of his mother's pen, he was thinking more of the pain he was about to give her than of his own despairing misery, or even for the moment of Adair.

At last Mrs Earlstoun threw down her pen with a little sigh of relief. "That is so much done anyhow. You have been very patient, Douglas; but I did want to get them off my mind. Will you ring the bell? Some one must go with them at once."

The notes despatched, she threw herself into a low chair facing Douglas. "Well, dear, what is it?"

"I had a letter this morning, mother; I wished to tell you about it."

"To be sure, so you had. Lady Lorrimore made us all very well aware of it," said Mrs

Earlstoun, with a laugh. "Really, I was quite sorry for you; it was very tactless of her. I do not at all admire that loud style some ladies permit themselves now. She is such a contrast to Hermione; I am sure she must be quite a trial to her, dear girl.

"Have you a room to spare?" with a forced smile.

"Of course there is. You wish me to ask some one, do you? I would have consulted you more as to making up the party; but really we saw so little of you, you naughty boy. Is it Cecil Rainsford?"

She was looking up with great pride and pleasure—as what mother would not have done—at this big stalwart son of hers. No one could ever fill poor Maurice's place in her heart; but, as she would have expressed it herself, she was very fond of Douglas. He was leaning against the mantelpiece, his face a little turned away.

"No, it is not Rainsford; but, mother, you would do me a very great favour if you would ask Miss Charteris here."

“Miss Charteris! What Miss Charteris?” echoed Mrs Earlstoun in surprise.

“Miss Cicely Charteris. You must know her name at least. She is at Canonbie with the Warristons, and would like to come here for a day or two.”

“Cicely Charteris, the actress! Not that I object in the least to that, and if she is at Canonbie it must be all right; but why in the world should she write to you about it?”

“Because we are engaged to be married.” The words seemed absolutely wrung out of him.

Mrs Earlstoun’s very lips turned white. She put her hand to her side, as if in actual physical pain. “Oh, Douglas, Douglas”—her voice rising to a cry—“I thought I had suffered all I could through my children! When Maurice was taken from me I looked to you to be a comfort to me; but this is worse than death. Oh, Douglas! how could you do it?”

The young man’s face was as white as her

own, but he said nothing. What could he say?

She looked up, her voice changing. "It cannot be, Douglas," she said, almost passionately; "you must see it yourself. It is no marriage for you: your father will never allow it."

"I do not think my father can prevent it," said Douglas quietly. "I would like to have his sanction and yours, if you can give it, but I must keep my word. I shall see my father presently, but I wished to tell you first."

Mrs Earlstoun stood in silent helplessness a moment. She knew only too well that if any one pressed a wish with sufficient determination on her husband, he would certainly yield. Douglas was the only direct heir; he was practically independent; he could raise what money he pleased, and there had been more than enough of that already. Pride and anger flashed up.

"Have you no feeling for me, for your father, for your own name, Douglas? I feared you might come and tell me that you had

become entangled with your cousin Adair"—Douglas clenched hard the hand that rested on the mantelpiece. "That would have been bad enough, but she is at least an Earlstoun; but for this girl—this actress—to be brought here as my son's wife,—how much do we know of her, or what she may have been?"

"Mother, dear," said Douglas, in a low voice, "will you try to remember that it is of your son's future wife you are speaking?"

"I can't believe it—I won't believe it!" cried the poor mother violently, love overcoming anger. She threw herself on his breast, and clasping her hands round his neck, looked up into his eyes, where a dull cloud of misery had settled. "My poor boy, I know you better than you do yourself. You do not care for this girl; I know it, I see it. You are not pleading as a lover would. Such a woman could never make you happy. She has got your promise somehow, and now you think you cannot draw back. Oh, Douglas! you men make a god of what you call your honour, and the sacrifices you offer it are

cruel—cruel ! Douglas,” her voice sinking to a hoarse whisper, while she hid her face on his breast, “you know what they said of my poor Maurice, that he—that he”—gasping—“threw his life away. Will you do the same ? Will you rob me of my two sons ? Will you break my heart afresh ? Oh, Douglas, Douglas ! I have been no true mother to you ; I have been a foolish, partial woman. I set my heart on my Maurice—my beautiful first-born—and oh ! I have been frightfully, frightfully punished. Must I stand by and see another son go down to ruin as he did ? Douglas, I am your mother still—forgive me, dear, that I have not been to you what I should have been ; but for my sake—for your mother’s sake—for the sake of the days when you were my dear little baby, when I held you in my arms and you smiled up in my face, oh, Douglas ! give this wild idea up. Oh, my darling ! it is for your own sake too. Will you spoil your young life ?” She burst into passionate hysterical crying.

Douglas could bear no more. He had been

prepared for anger, for reproaches, for entreaties even, but this sudden outburst of emotion, this unexpected revelation of his mother's heart, in which till now he had thought he had but so small a share, all but unmanned him. The pleading of his mother's eyes, the anguish of the beautiful face on which age seemed suddenly to have set its stamp, were torture to him. He gently drew away her clinging hands, putting them to his lips as he did so, and throwing himself on to a chair, covered his face. He had hardly ever seen a tear in his mother's eyes; now every sob was like a knife driven through his heart. His whole nature was up in arms against himself. "Why should you do this thing?" it cried; "you do not love Cicely—you know you do not. She does not care for you; she will get another lover. What was your life when you were under her spell? Will she make a better, purer man of you? Will you refuse the one thing the mother who bore you has ever pled for? What is this woman to you, that for her sake you should wring your

mother's heart? Will you curse your whole life? Adair is not wholly indifferent to you,—she has not yet forgotten the past. You might win her love even yet.” The voice grew more insistent. “Will you cast such a hope aside, and all that it might bring you?”—and Douglas almost groaned aloud, as a vision of what the future might have held for him rose before him, as the past is said to flash before the eyes of drowning men. His mother's sobs had died away; she lay back in her chair, silent and exhausted, watching him. He rose at last, and, kneeling down by her side, put his arms round her. She looked anxiously into his face, and her heart sank down within her.

“Mother,” he said very low, “God bless you for what you have said to-day. I know now that I have my mother's love, and you do not know how much that is to me; but, mother, you would not urge your son to dishonour. My word is pledged,—what I did deliberately I must stand by.”

“You must take your own way, then,

Douglas," broke in Mrs Earlstoun coldly, "though it be over my heart. I can say nothing more. One thing only I ask, that you say nothing to your father to-day."

"Anything you like," said Douglas, in a flat dull voice. He looked up, their eyes met in one long look, and then with a sudden cry, "Oh, mother, mother!" he let his head fall on her lap, as he might have done long years ago in some childish heartbreak. In that look she learned something of his bitter secret. "As one whom his mother comforteth." There was no comfort for Douglas Earlstoun in his sore strait, but at least there was some soothing in giving vent to his misery—in the soft caressing touch of those gentle hands on his hair, in the tender incoherent words vaguely heard through the strife within. The many years that she had lived in the world and for the world had not yet crushed the mother's heart out of Mrs Earlstoun. With the divine instinctive self-forgetfulness of mother-love, she put aside for the time her own wounded love and hurt pride in the effort to comfort

her boy. When he rose and left her, and she heard the slow heavy step, so unlike his quick eager tread, die away, she sat looking at the fair young pictured face that seemed to be watching her out of those cold, half-veiled, unsympathetic eyes, while the great bitter tears silently welled out of her own. Were they for the living or the dead? For which of her sons had she most need to weep?

CHAPTER IX.

“MOTHER, everybody is clamouring for you. Why, what is the matter,—is there anything wrong?” said Isabel, in her distinct, deliberate tones, coming a little nearer.

Mrs Earlstoun turned away her head. She very rarely gave way to tears, and felt half ashamed to exhibit their traces now to her daughter’s cold scrutiny.

“I cannot come, Isabel. Tell them I am ill, I have a headache, anything you please,—get rid of them somehow. That woman Lorrimore’s chatter would drive me mad just now. I was to have driven with her, or something.”

“Shall I send Pincott to you?” asked Isabel, moving away. That she might in any way attempt to minister to a mind or body diseased never occurred to her.

“No ; I only want to be alone for a little. But come back as soon as you can, Isabel ; there is something I must speak to you about.”

“Is it anything very special ? I cannot very well wait just now, and it may be some time before I get back.”

Mrs Earlstoun looked round. Isabel was in her habit, a miracle of fit and absolute perfection of detail : the straight narrow skirt made exactly to encase the figure when on horse-back might be safer and more business-like, but hardly so graceful, as the full flowing folds of former days.

“You are going out riding ?”

“Yes, with Sir Claud. The poor man came to me in despair. Douglas was to have driven him to Terregles, but he has disappeared, it seems. Mother, if you could manage it, I think you would be better to go down. That little goose, Lord Romer, is making a mystery about that letter that Lady Lorrimore made such a senseless fuss over this morning ; and if both you and Douglas keep out of sight, people are sure to think that there is some-

thing up. Is there anything really wrong? Never mind just now,—I shall hear all about it when I come back.”

Mrs Earlstoun rose and rang for her maid. The sacred duty of keeping up appearances must be fulfilled, however unfit she felt in mind or body to face her guests. She tottered when she tried to cross the room, and caught at the writing-table to steady herself. As she did so a sight met her eyes that was a new pang. Down by the fountain Hermione was standing, tall and stately, while Lord Romer was exerting himself, by every possible device, to make her little terrier enter the water for the sticks and stones he was throwing in. The sunlight, the sparkling water, the glowing flower-beds, the girl in her light summer gown, her attendant cavalier, and the futile bounds and rushes of the excited dog round the couple, made up the prettiest little *genre* picture: but for Lord Romer's shooting suit, it might have been a garden scene by Watteau or Boucher. The lines on Mrs Earlstoun's face deepened as she watched them.

There was the fitting mate for her son, she thought, as the girl, in her large ripe beauty, moved indolently and gracefully away. Instead of her, she must prepare to receive this unknown actress, this scheming woman, who had beguiled her son. Ah, well, with a short bitter laugh, she had better try to be philosophical like Isabel and put her trouble aside, to be taken up at a more convenient season, when no one was waiting to be talked to or driven with, each ready to build up a towering fabric of gossip and speculation on the foundation of an hour's absence or a cloud on their hostess's face.

Poor Mrs Earlstoun ! it was a heavy day for her, accustomed as she was from long practice to wear a smile for every one, and to have all the appropriate little comments on her friends' remarks ready at the right moment, whatever or wherever her thoughts might be. Mrs Mackay had toiled up from the Water-foot to pay a formal duty call. She was now sitting hot and uneasy on the edge of her chair, painfully conscious of the dust on her best gown, the split

unnoticed before in one of her gloves, and the crumbly cake she had unluckily selected, which was spreading dire traces not only on her lap but over the carpet. To her the mistress of Earlshope seemed a person very much to be envied, without a care in the world, and she wondered anew over the mysteries of Providence, which dealt so differently with its creatures. She could be sweet and serene and smiling too, if she were quite certain that at that very moment Betty were not gossiping at the back-door, while the boys were climbing the trees or tumbling into the burn. Something would be sure to happen as soon as her back was turned. Neither would she have looked so flushed and blown about, a fact of which a big mirror made her most uncomfortably aware, if she had a barouche to loll in, instead of having to trudge through wind and dust. It was no credit to rich people to be amiable. What could Mrs Earlstoun or any of those fine folk, laughing and chattering over their tea-cups, have to trouble them? Mrs Mackay certainly bore no resemblance to the immortal Becky.

Had she known anything of that lady, which was at least doubtful, she would probably have been utterly scandalised at a breath of comparison being made between them ; but apparently she held the same opinion as to the ease with which all the virtues might be practised on the basis of several thousands a-year. Probably Mrs Earlstoun had a very different estimate of the extent to which a barouche and pair, or silent well-trained servants, can alleviate the ills of life ; but which of us is not convinced of the peculiar and special hardships of our own lot ? When she got away at last from the clinking of tea-cups and the ceaseless flow of light talk and laughter, it was perhaps little wonder if, after long hours of Lady Lorrimore's and Mrs Milbrooke's company, her mood had changed a little from that of the morning. After the outburst of violent emotion the inevitable reaction had set in ; the gradual cooling of the lava flood, which for once had broken through the smooth crust of conventional daily life. Then in the quickening of her mother-love, she had thought but little

of the worldly aspects of this most unwelcome marriage. The uppermost feeling had been dread lest her son should be driven to follow in his brother's steps, to sink into that dissolute recklessness which among the Daylesford men, and women too sometimes, seemed like an inherited taint in the blood. But one warm outburst of feeling, however natural and genuine, is not enough to change the habits of thought and feeling of a lifetime, and sympathy with Douglas was rapidly giving place to keen annoyance at what she was now ready to call his infatuation, and to a bitter consciousness of the outward disadvantages of such a match. It was in this more normal state of mind that Isabel found her mother, when she came to her room, saying—

“ Well, mother, what is the calamity? You see I have not even waited to take off my habit, and if that is not a sacrifice to family feeling, after a three hours' ride, I do not know what is. Who is this mysterious ‘ Cis ’? I suppose it is she who has fluttered the family dovecot to such an extent; at least, I

am taking it for granted it is a she. *Cherchez la femme* is generally a pretty safe principle, especially where any one like Douglas is concerned. I have always thought him just the sort of fellow a clever woman could have pretty much her own way with. Witness what has been going on here those last few days."

"What do you mean, Isabel?"

"Tell me about 'Cis' first. I think you know what I mean pretty well."

"Cis is some second- or third-rate actress—Miss Cicely Charteris—whom Douglas is determined to marry. That letter was from her this morning. She is at Canonbie, it seems, and wants to come here—to spy out her future kingdom, I suppose," said Mrs Earlstoun bitterly.

"I did not imagine even Douglas would have been such a fool," said Isabel composedly. "One really needs a title to carry off that sort of thing. People pretend to be democratic, but they dearly love a lord all the same, and condone his little eccentricities

very readily. If Douglas had only been Lord Rulewater it would have been all right. I am sure I don't know why father has always refused a title. Who is to know, when Mr and Mrs Earlstoun are announced, that you are descended through twenty generations from some Border ruffian who probably deserved hanging, whether he got it or not; or whether you are stockbrokers, or 'kings' of something chemical and unpleasant, of the day before yesterday. You would have been a charming countess, mother—what a contrast from Lady Lorrimore! and for my part, I think Lady Isabel Maxwell would have sounded much better than plain Lady Maxwell."

"Is that settled then, Isabel? Am I to congratulate you?" said Mrs Earlstoun, with a faint smile, a suggestion perhaps of satisfaction and relief in her voice. She had been listening with a decidedly *distrain* air, but it was needless to try to interrupt Isabel.

"Not quite yet, perhaps, but I think you may regard it as a fixture. I have not quite

made up my mind, but on the whole I think it will do very well. One cannot have everything, of course, and he will soon give up those little whims."

"Well, my dear, if you are satisfied, that is everything. I hope you will be very happy," with a little sigh. Mrs Earlstoun sometimes felt as if her daughter were the older, certainly the more worldly-wise, of the two. In her secret heart she was at times a little overawed by Isabel's cool calculating indifference. The little lingering spice of romance, which years of judicious repression had not yet wholly eliminated, might perhaps have craved some warmer recognition of a future husband's merits and attractions, though as to the latter she, along with Isabel, would doubtless have considered Middleton the chief. Still the long-dormant fibre which had thrilled in the morning, under the touch of genuine human passion, was not yet wholly numb again, and Isabel's superb calmness jarred upon it as she answered—

"Thanks, I am sure there is no fear of it.

Middleton will be a very fine place when we get it put to rights; and then there is all the old man's money besides, which is better than having everything in land, I suppose, now. Being in the House will soon cure Claud of his nonsense; and as I have no objection to a title, even though a brand-new one, you will see me Baroness, or perhaps Countess, of Middleton some day. It is all a question of influence, which means money. That would please you, mother?"

"Yes, my dear, if it will please you," rather absently. "But, Isabel, what about this dreadful business? we are forgetting Douglas. I told him to say nothing to your father to-day, at least, about it. What is to be done?"

"I see no need of troubling father at all. Leave the poor man in peace to his coins and his charters. I would say, let her come."

"Let her come!" echoed Mrs Earlstoun, a little piqued that the news which had produced so profound an effect upon her seemed not even to ruffle Isabel's placidity. "Let

her come! Do you consider what that implies? You take it coolly, I must say. The heir of your house marrying this unknown actress creature!"

"It need not imply anything. If you oppose it, you will only make Douglas all the more determined. Let her come, and I think it will cure itself—only she must come on one condition, which you and father, if you think it needful to drag him in, have every right to make. There must be no recognised engagement in the meantime, and not a whisper that there is any understanding between them. She must come as an ordinary guest, or not at all. I insist on it, mother. I won't have everything spoiled now. It is all very well to prose about Humanity and Brotherhood, and a variety of other vague things with big capitals, but all the same some men don't want an actress for a sister-in-law. Things are going on very well, but my little Socialist might take fright at such a practical application of his principles. He is not the only one, to be sure, but I have been Miss

Earlstoun long enough, and I am not going to have everything sacrificed to Douglas."

"It would put Douglas in a very false position. Perhaps he would not agree to it."

"He must agree to it. Either she comes here on your terms, or not at all," said Isabel, with unwonted energy. "He has put himself and all of us in a false enough position already, I should think. If she does not choose to come on such a footing, so much the better. Is Douglas very deeply smitten, do you think?"

"Oh, poor boy, no!" Douglas's face and the misery in his eyes rising up again before her; but of that she could not speak to Isabel. "I do not believe it ever was anything but a passing fancy, but she has entrapped him into a promise, and he considers himself bound to hold to it. He cannot break his word, he says, but I am sure he would be thankful now if he could."

Isabel rolled her riding-gloves into a ball and flung them from her, a sign of most unwonted exasperation. "I have no patience

with some men, and the fetish they make of their word or their honour, or whatever they choose to call it. I wish they were as particular about everything else. However," recovering her wonted serenity, "this is better and better. If I am not mistaken, Douglas has a very strong attraction here. There was always some boy-and-girl philandering between him and Adair. I don't say she is my taste, but some people think her very handsome. Very well, Douglas is pretty well disenchanted with his Cis already. He won't get fonder of her when she is contrasted with Adair, and I hardly think he will be very clever at concealing his feelings. We shall have jealousy and a quarrel before many days are over, and then she may make eyes at Lord Romer or depart in peace as soon as she likes."

"But what of Adair?" said Mrs Earlstoun uneasily; "it hardly seems fair to her."

"Oh, don't worry about her, mother. It is her own business. She must know perfectly well that a marriage between her and Douglas

is out of the question. If she burns her fingers it is her own look-out, but for my part I think she is very well able to take care of herself. She has certainly been improving the shining hour most admirably since we came, strolling down to the station quite unconsciously, of course, the day that Douglas came, and carrying him off to the Old Manse at once, and putting everything on the old footing again. Really it was very cleverly done. And then all those moonlight walks home, with the bridge to linger at, and so on. If it were not that we require her now to checkmate Miss Charteris, I would advise you to have her here altogether, or else incur Scott's wrath by turning out the brougham for her at night. I am sure no one except father, who is for ever mooning among old stones and bones and things, would ever have made such a mistake as to settle them here at our very gates. We can't but ask them here in decency, and people do ask such questions, and too many girls are always a nuisance.

By the by, though, I am afraid we must ask Mrs Charles and that pert little second one some night soon, if only for peace' sake. I heard so much about my 'poor dear uncle' the last time I saw them. I wonder if that child knows how absurd she is, with her little airs and her over-dressed look? They might come along with the ruck from Muirshiels."

Isabel's armour of self-complacency was too dense for any shaft of jealousy to strike through it and rankle. She would quite freely admit that other girls might be more beautiful than she, but then they were "quite a different style," she would say, in a tone that implied that that style was a decidedly inferior one, and that in her own she was unapproachable, as a tragedy queen might smile condescendingly on the brief triumphs of a burlesque actress. Still she had heard a little too much about Adair during the last few days. Every one had asked about her, and every one had admired her, the few simple good-natured people who are still to be met

with, thinking it would please her, and the ill-natured ones, still more cordially and openly, hoping to annoy her.

“I suppose we may consider the palaver ended. It is getting late, and I want Fanchette to try my hair in a new style. She is not half enterprising, I tell her ; she would go on in the same old way for ever, and I get sick of a thing when every one has it,” said Isabel, rising. “If you take my advice, mother, you will let ‘Cis’ come. It does not commit you to anything, as long as there is no talk of an engagement ; and if matters don’t arrange themselves, as I am pretty sure they will, you have always the resource of bringing father forward as bogey, and refusing to allow the marriage. Then if Douglas will throw himself away, things will be no worse than they are at present.”

“And the future Lady Maxwell’s settlements will be under discussion by that time,” —not without a tinge of bitterness.

“Very likely. I mean they shall be anyhow, and when I set my mind on anything I

generally get it. Father must bestir himself a little; or if that is past praying for, as I suppose it is, you must give Mr Moncrieff a hint to see that things are done rightly. I have no doubt Sir Claud will be generous enough, but it is as well to look after one's own interest in such matters."

"You are looking forward in good time, certainly, Isabel."

"Why should I not? What is the good of affecting a sentimental indifference or ignorance of what all one's comfort depends on? Come, mother! don't for pity's sake look so harassed; it makes you look positively old. Douglas is not married yet, and a thousand and one things may happen—are sure to happen—to prevent it. After all, it may not be such a bad thing to have the girl here. She must be presentable, or the Warristons would not have her. We ought perhaps to have somebody of that sort in the house at any rate. Some of our dear friends are rather heavy in hand, and the more Philistine people are, the more they are interested in what such

strange beings as actors and actresses are like in private life."

"I wonder if I ever saw her. Of course I have seen her name flaring on bills, but I don't think I have seen her. One has so little time for the theatre, unless it is anything that is specially talked about," said Mrs Earlstoun musingly.

"Now that I think of it, I did meet her; she was at one house professionally, I believe, but at the other she seemed to be simply a guest—really like one of ourselves."

"What was she like?" asked Mrs Earlstoun, rather eagerly.

"Get Douglas to give you a description of his beloved," laughed Isabel; "how should I know? Those sort of people don't at all interest me. She was rather tall and thin, I think, but whether her hair was red or black or yellow I couldn't tell you,—all of them by turns, I fancy. She had a wonderful brocade gown on, though; I cannot think how those people get their clothes. And talking of clothes, unless I am to appear at dinner in

my habit and you in your tea-gown, I really must be off. Douglas ought to be grateful for the amount of time we have devoted to him and his affairs. Take a practical view of matters, mother, and don't worry. That is my philosophy, and I find it answers very well. We shall always have the diversion of watching the little drama, at least."

CHAPTER X.

Buzz—buzz—buzz,—a great bumble-bee was blundering angrily up and down the pane, striking its head on the glass, utterly unable to comprehend why it could not make its way through to the blazing sunshine without; hum—hum—hum went the preacher's voice from the tall pulpit, the one sound being about as arousing and enlivening as the other to such of his hearers as were still awake. Poor Mr Mackay! he was perhaps hardly to be blamed if he had sunk to this dead level of decent monotony under a system which demands from a man two sermons week after week, whether he have anything special to say or no; and however many-sided truth may be, the average man is hardly prepared to give a fresh and living presentment of it

twice weekly. Nor was the charge of those "few sheep in the wilderness" an inspiring one. If any man remained for more than a year or two in Rule Water kirk, it was, as a rule, simply because, as even his own hearers shrewdly surmised, he could get no other. "We're like the conies, but a feeble folk here, an' canna expeck to get the wale o' preachers; we hae to pit up wi' the riddlin's," as Saunders said, who considered himself from his position a privileged critic. Here and there among the scanty congregation was some reverent thoughtful face, or keen inquiring one. Those were probably shepherds who, during their long hours upon the lonely uplands and hills, face to face with nature in storm and calm, at dawn or midnight or noon, driven in perforce upon themselves, had ample leisure for thought and questioning. In such minds what strange dim thoughts often shape themselves—too vast for their simple powers of expression. But the most of the hearers, or sleepers rather, were farm-labourers, who no more dreamed of inquiring for what rea-

son or purpose they went to church, than they thought of questioning the destiny which had set them to hoe turnips or drive the plough. After their long week's toil in the open air, the disturbing elements of psalm and prayer once safely over, most of them placidly composed themselves to slumber under the double soporific of the even flow of sound and the close heavy air. To-day, however, the majority had been somewhat longer of succumbing, for had they not the unwonted spectacle of the "gentry" in the Earlschope pew to stare at? This was a square enclosure in the front of the little gallery, with a canopy above it, like a larger edition of the one which, surmounted by a singular specimen of the feathered creation, artlessly supposed to represent the symbolic dove, impended over the pulpit. The congregation indeed enjoyed quite unusual facilities for looking about, for the ranges of pews in front of the pulpit were what are known as "table-seats," whose occupants sat in two rows facing each other, instead of all looking

in the one orthodox direction towards the preacher. While Mr Mackay plodded manfully on through his abstruse theological definitions, which affected his hearers' lives and interests about as much as "the difference 'twixt tweedledum and tweedledee," Adair found her own eyes occasionally wandering towards "the gentry" also. They were somewhat more attractive than her other usual resource, the Manse pew directly opposite. The probable behaviour of its eight restless occupants always afforded ample room for speculation. To-day their anxious mother's frowns at the more distant offenders, and admonitory tweaks and pushes at those within reach, were of even less avail than usual. Whether excited by the presence of strangers, or by the occasional frantic inroads of the bewildered bee, the little sandy heads rolled about ceaselessly, like the unquiet waves of the sea. Yes; the Earlshope pew was a pleasanter object for a stray glance than those hot, weary little urchins. Mrs Earlstoun, although a devout enough churchwoman, considered it her duty,

when in Scotland, to support "the church as by law established" there, and no doubt felt that she was conferring a special favour on kirk and country by doing so. A number of her guests had followed her example, and the dim little gallery bloomed with bright summer toilets, instead of presenting the gaping dusty void which was its normal appearance during most of the year. The men of the party had that air of decent mournful resignation into which the masculine countenance usually composes itself in church. Lord Romer, whose shooting experiences had hitherto been confined to more northern regions, was lost in astonishment to find that no part of the service was in Gaelic. At last certain time-honoured phrases proclaimed to accustomed ears that release was at hand. Mr Mackay had all but wound out his tangled theological skein—to his own satisfaction, at least, it is to be hoped. The sleepers sat up, and looked round with an air of bovine defiance. A psalm was given out, and Mr Dallas, forgetting the manners and

habits of Rule Water kirk, drew all eyes to himself by promptly getting to his feet, and being as promptly pulled back to his seat again by Douglas. To her annoyance, Adair met his glance as the growling bass voices, mingled with a few faltering trebles, rose in unison. He was evidently recalling and sympathising with her description of the sacred minstrelsy of the district. But the psalm was the 121st, in the old Scotch metre version; and looking out through the big many-paned window to the waving outline of the Camp and the Misty Law, Adair forgot her passing vexation and the discords round her, as she joined in the familiar favourite words—

“I to the hills will lift mine eyes,
From whence doth come mine aid.”

It was true to the letter, for where else had she yet found help or soothing save among their solemn silences?

“For goodness’ sake, don’t look round, Adair!” exclaimed Agnes breathlessly, as they emerged into the broad sunshine without.

"Mrs Mackay is signalling like a semaphore behind us, but I don't want to fall into her clutches just now. The Earlshope people will be out immediately, and there are some empty seats, I know, in the waggonette. I don't fancy walking home in this heat if I can avoid it, so, please, look very straight before you, and pretend you don't notice."

Too late. "Girls, girls!" called an excited voice behind them.

"Bother the woman! I knew we wouldn't escape," said Agnes pettishly.

"Go you on, then, Aggie," said Adair resignedly; "I'll see what she wants. I don't object to the walk so much as you do, and it does seem rather shabby to shirk her so."

"Agnes is going with the others, I see. Don't let me keep you. *Do* you think the children would be much noticed to-day? In church, at least, I am inclined to think Mr Mackay's short sight is really a providence. I don't know what he would say if he saw them, although I am sure I do my very best. I trusted Betty to-day to feel all their pockets,

and what do you think !—she let Wattie bring one of his white mice with him, and Jim had a marble ; and what with that and a bee you perhaps noticed had got in, I had neither peace nor rest. I am sure there is no need for me going to church for all the good I get, but Mr Mackay will have all the children come, for an example, he says ; and perhaps it is just as well, for if any of them were left behind, I could not sit still for wondering what they were doing. Did it look very bad ?” uttered Mrs Mackay, without breath or pause.

“They were no worse than usual. I don’t know how people can expect children to sit still so long,” said Adair, trying to hold the balance between truth and consolation.

“That was not what I meant to say to you, though. Did you hear ? but of course you must have heard, and you will be able to tell me if it is really true—I can hardly imagine it. One should scarcely be speaking about such things on the Sabbath-day, but I may not have a chance of seeing you for a day

or two. Mrs Johnson, decent body, was down for a little last night, and she tells me another visitor is coming—an actress!—yes, an actress, she was quite positive. Did you hear about it?”

“I heard that a Miss Charteris was coming, but I do not think any one said she was an actress. However, I have not been much across for a day or two.”

“Well, it puts me in a very unfortunate position. It is very awkward. I never would have thought it of Mrs Earlstoun, coming to church as she does every Sabbath so regularly, too. You see Mr Mackay and I are invited for dinner on Wednesday. Mrs Earlstoun was very pressing about it, I must say, and is going to send down for us; but if this Miss Charteris is to be there, I really don’t know what we should do. I have not spoken about it yet to Mr Mackay, and you know he is a little—just a little—extreme in his opinions, and he might feel we ought not to give our sanction to such people by going. A minister has to be careful not to compromise his posi-

tion, you know; and yet I would not like to hurt Mrs Earlstoun's feelings, for really she has been very kind about it. Now what do you think?" anxiously.

Adair could hardly refrain from smiling at this case of casuistry so gravely presented to her.

"I don't think you need distress yourself about that. I am afraid we have not been moving with the world and getting rid of our old-fashioned ideas. Actors and actresses seem to be quite the salt of the earth nowadays,—what with Church and Stage Guilds, and so on. Why, an actor was addressing a Church Congress the other day."

"Well, of course you young people have time for reading; no one, I say, can do her duty to eight children and read much. But that would be in England," the temporary expression of relief fading. "I am afraid we can't take the Episcopal Church as an example for ourselves. If it had been the General Assembly, now, it would have been very different."

“Very different indeed,” laughed Adair. “I am afraid it will be some time before we are so advanced as that here; but why not lead the way, and show a shining example of charity?”

Mrs Mackay looked a little offended. “I don’t think, my dear, you quite understand how serious it is, if it were to get about that Mr Mackay had been dining with an actress!”

“But you are not quite sure whether she is an actress after all,” suggested Adair mischievously.

“To be sure, that is quite true. You would have heard before any one, I should think. It would seem very strange to refuse now, and you see my dress is all ready. I got Miss Jarvie to do it up anew, just to be prepared. She wanted me to get something fresh, but no; I said every one knows a good black silk when they see it, and what would one have better? And, after all, I don’t know that we should take too much upon ourselves. Mrs Earlstoun is responsible for her guests, not

we. I would never, of course, set my foot in a theatre ; but if this Miss Charteris should be an actress, it would be rather interesting to see what those people are like. Now, my dear, I have kept you so long, you'll just come in and have a bit of our early dinner. It's just boiled mutton, for I can't trust Betty yet with anything else—and even then, I never know whether it will be raw or in rags ; but you'll take pot-luck, and the children are so pleased to see you."

If a dozen little feet trampling on her gown, the same number of elbows jostling each other on her knees, and a few pairs of arms tightly clasped round her neck, might be regarded as demonstrations of pleasure, there could be little doubt of the young Mackays' affection for her, Adair thought. Still, the fresh white gown which had cost her no small labour only the day before was not to be recklessly exposed to such an ordeal ; so, evading Mrs Mackay's hospitality, she made her way through the little groups still lingering in the churchyard, smiling to herself and wondering whether

conscience or curiosity would win the day. For herself, she owned to very considerable stirrings of curiosity.

Passing Saunders's grey stone cottage, Adair thought she would go in and see the old man. She knew that he was always delighted in his grim way to have a visit, especially when it was unconnected with workaday matters. Without waiting for a reply to her light knock on the half-open door, she stepped into the dim little kitchen. After the blaze of light without, it seemed almost dark, although the sunlight was pouring in in a long level shaft through the little low window, which was half obscured by a great fuchsia, its graceful drooping bells glowing crimson in the vivid light. By the side of the "well-happit" fire the old man was already seated. His coat was reverently laid aside, but otherwise he was still in all the glory of his Sunday "blacks," and the stiffly starched white shirt donned in honour of the day, and of his important duty of carrying the big Bible up the narrow pulpit stair, and closing the

door with a snap upon the minister. This was a common enough sight, but to Adair's utter amazement he was holding a tiny child most uneasily perched on one knee, and uttering for its entertainment a series of extraordinary sounds, while the little creature sat regarding him with an air of dispassionate inquiring gravity, as if privately wondering why any grown person should willingly make such a fool of himself. At Adair's exclamation of surprise he looked up with something positively like a blush, if it had been possible to conceive of such a thing on his wrinkled leathery visage.

"Deed ye may weel wonner, Miss Adair," nearly dropping the child in a well-meant attempt to rise and draw forward a chair for her, "tae see me turned bairn's-maid. Like the wife in the auld sang, I micht say too, 'This is no' me.' I was ne'er one for ony troke wi' weans, but that puir haunless cratur Jean Spence neist door is laid up again. Marget's wi' her e'enoow, and as the wean seemed fashin' her, I e'en brocht it in

here to bide for a bit. I'm sure puir Jock Spence is to be peetied wi' that ailin' body. I kenna what men want wi' wives and weans. Look at Marget an' me, hoo quiet an' comfortable we are here. But Mysie's a guid lass, isna she?" inserting a big rough forefinger cautiously under the round baby chin.

Adair watched with dancing eyes the old man's uncouth attempts to ingratiate himself into Mysie's favour, but the serious little child-face did not relax till she held out her hands to her, saying, with the smile that won the hearts of all children, the eight Mackays included, "Come to me, little one."

"That looks more nat'rel, I will admit," said Saunders, stretching himself from the cramped position out of which he had been afraid to move. Adair walked up and down, dancing the child in her strong young arms till its infantine gravity gave way to little bursts of bubbling laughter, as, pausing in the full stream of sunlight, she held it out towards the fuchsia, snatching it play-

fully back just as the little grasping hands had almost seized the crimson bells.

“Deed, Miss Adair,” went on the old man, lovingly fingering the pipe for which he was privately yearning, but which till now he had sacrificed to little Mysie, “I wull say it, there’s naething I’d like better than to see ye wi’ a bonnie bairn o’ yer ain in yer airms; an’ wha kens,” with a chuckle, “but what we may?”

A shadow fell on the floor. “I say, Saunders—I beg your pardon—oh, it is you, Adair! I could not think whom Saunders was entertaining,—angels unawares, it seemed at first,” said Douglas, pausing in the doorway.

“Then you have changed your opinion on finding it was only I,” laughed Adair, stepping back out of the sunlight, the quick flush still on her cheeks, though she was well accustomed to the “great plainness of speech” that obtained on the Rule Water. But little Mysie set up a sudden wail at being thus summarily deprived of her diversion, and Adair had to indulge her in it again, while Saunders, with

a twinkle in his eyes, rose to welcome "Maister Douglas."

"I was renewing my acquaintance with some of the old folk in the churchyard, when I discovered that everybody had driven off and left me, so I thought I'd look you up," said Douglas. "I think you good people here have discovered the secret of perpetual youth. I felt as if I hadn't been a day away when I saw you coming in with the big Bible again."

"Hoot, sir, what's five years? ye'll think it short eneuch when ye come to my time o' life."

"Do you remember the day when we found the church door open, and went in and rang the bell, Saunders?"

"Div I no', Maister Douglas; an' I'm thinkin' ye had guid cause to mind it too," said the old man, with a grim cackle of enjoyment.

"I think we'll not dwell on that part of it, Saunders," said Douglas, with a laugh; "but that rope had tempted me for years,

and I remember yet the fearful joy of getting a hold of it at last—though, as you say, we had to pay for it, like all other stolen sweets.”

Adair was relieved when Marget made her appearance—a meek-faced, elderly woman, who endured with the utmost patience the many buffetings her sex received at her brother’s hands. Adair yielded up Mysie to her, though the child clung to her, and refused to be comforted by all Marget’s blandishments. As the cousins went out together, the door of every cottage, apparently tenantless till now, suddenly bristled with heads watching them go down the road.

“Eh, they’d make a bonnie pair!” said Marget, patting Mysie vigorously on the back the while.

“You weemen and your mairryin’! I thocht you would hae had mair sense by this time, Marget. I ne’er saw onything come o’ mairryin’ but wark an’ weans an’ worry, an’ to ma thinkin’ there’s mair than eneuch o’ a’ three in the world already,” said Saunders contemptuously; but all the same

he watched the couple as eagerly as the other lookers-on till the last flutter of Adair's white gown had vanished out of sight.

"I am afraid that after such a long holiday from it, Rule Water kirk has been quite too much for you to-day, Douglas. The day you came, you told me you were in a very repentant mood. I could have believed it to-day. I don't know what your own shortcomings may be, but you looked doleful enough to be repenting for the sins of all the country-side," said Adair with a laugh, after they had walked some distance almost in silence, save for a stray remark on the heat or the dust, to which latter Douglas was unconsciously adding by switching vengefully at the whitened nettles and burdocks by the roadside. He had not sought this walk—it would likely be the last they would have together. Why might he not enjoy it, then? he was saying to himself. But it was easier to keep silence than to talk mere commonplace, which was all he had a right to utter now.

“I don’t know how one could be expected to look joyful when one is being cramped and suffocated and stupefied all at once,” he said. “If church-going is supposed to be for one’s good, it can only be on the same principle that when anything particularly disagreeable happens to you, every one assures you it is for your good. Much obliged, I am sure, but I’d rather do without the good, or take it in some other fashion. As I said to Saunders, I felt as if I had never been a day away when I heard poor old Mackay droning away again. I think the only difference is that there are a few more heads in the Manse pew. What an awful set of little beggars they are, and what a life they lead that poor unlucky woman.”

“I don’t wonder Mr Mackay holds such Calvinistic views. A week—a day, rather—at the Manse would convert any one to the doctrine of original sin,” laughed Adair, “and make havoc of any pleasant little delusions they might have as to the inno-

cence of childhood. Really, I don't know if we were very much better, though. Do you remember the Scotts who sat in the pew before us, and the straw-coloured ribbons they wore streaming from their hats, and how when they all fell peacefully asleep, and their heads dropped back, we used to pile all the available Bibles on to those ribbons, and sit in ecstasy, watching for the forward bob that was sure to come?"

"Oh, by Jove, don't I?" laughed Douglas, forgetting all his preoccupations for a moment. "How I used to wish I were down beside you, instead of being stuck up yonder for everybody who was not asleep to stare at. I say, this is horrid for you," as a puff of wind raised the hot white dust. "It is a shame you should have to walk; I thought you had gone with the others."

"I might, I suppose, but Mrs Mackay was consulting me as to a case of conscience. Ought I not to feel flattered? She is greatly exercised as to the advent of a certain Miss Charteris, who, she has been informed, is an

actress, and she has grave doubts whether she and Mr Mackay can dine at the same table with her without compromising the character of the clergy and the cause of religion in general, and appearing to sanction all the abominations of the theatre. After appealing to charity and common-sense in vain, I am afraid I suggested a very unworthy compromise—that she was not quite certain that Miss Charteris was an actress. I am afraid it was rather mean, but I have a sneaking sympathy with her curiosity. Is Miss Charteris an actress?”

“Who has been speaking to you about her?” asked Douglas sharply.

“No one has been speaking to me about her,” said Adair, a little surprised. “That is exactly what I complain of. If you lived here ‘always—all the year,’ as Mr Dallas puts it, you would learn to make not only two but *three* bites of every cherry of an event or a pleasure that comes in your way. I always count on having the anticipation, the reality, and then the looking back on it, and it is

really wonderful how long you can make a thing spin out in that fashion. As the anticipation is always the best of the three, I think it is quite too bad that I should have been deprived of it in this case. Think of the excitement of seeing a real live actress to any one in my condition of savage ignorance, who has hardly even seen the outside of a theatre. We had better make up for lost time now ; you can tell me all about her. You have seen her, of course ? ”

“ Yes, I have seen her.” Douglas looked helplessly about him : for the first time in his life he would have hailed the sight of the Old Manse gate with relief.

“ Well ? ” inquiringly.

“ Well,” rather doggedly.

“ I want to know all about her. I suppose it is very shocking, but I have never even heard her name. The ‘ Muirshiels Patriot ’ is altogether sunk in an Irish bog, and takes no notice of matters dramatic. Is she tall or short, dark or fair, rising or risen, tragic or comic ? I don’t want to display my ignorance,

like the unhappy Southron who, when introduced with bated breath to an ecclesiastical luminary as 'the great Dr So - and - so,' immediately began inquiring about his practice and his patients. Poor man, he would be instantly reduced to 'a speck o' inveesibeelity,' to quote Saunders's last. Now I want you to save me from such a fate," turning her lovely laughing eyes on him.

Douglas beheaded an unoffending thistle. What spirit of mischief had suggested such a subject to Adair? Might he not have had this last hour in peace?

"Really I hardly know what to tell you. I am afraid I am a very bad hand at describing any one. You will see her for yourself to-morrow, then you can form an unbiassed opinion."

"Why, is that all you have to say? She has surely not made much impression on you, or else it is too deep for words. Is she celebrated? What was she playing? Shakespeare?"

"Shakespeare—no!" with a dry little laugh.

"It was a French play." It suddenly occurred to Douglas that he would hardly like to describe the play to Adair. "She has been quite the rage this season. I am not a judge of such things, but she is certainly very striking on the stage. Some people liken her to the divine Sarah."

"How I should like to see really great acting," said Adair, with a little sigh. "It must be a wonderful gift. Do you think she will act while she is here?"

"No, I should never allow it," said Douglas impetuously; then in some confusion, seeing Adair's astonished look, "I mean, I don't think it is at all likely. She is here for a holiday, I suppose, and will be glad to leave all that behind her. I know, now that I am here, I should be glad to forget all about town and everything connected with it, so suppose we talk about something else than Miss Charteris."

But talk cannot be made to order, and Adair was pretty effectually silenced. She had been talking with a sort of nervous

rapidity, under the new sense of constraint that she felt when alone with Douglas. Had she been too forward? Evidently at least she had bored him with her questions. Well, with a little haughty lifting of the round white chin, she would not offend in that way again.

If Douglas was disinclined to talk about Miss Charteris, he did not seem to have any other subject to suggest, and the murmur of the water, by which they were now walking, was welcome to fill up the long pauses between each disjointed remark.

Douglas left his cousin at the gate, and walked on to Earlshope in no enviable frame of mind. Why had he ever submitted to such an impossible arrangement? or rather, why had he allowed the decision to rest with Miss Charteris? He should have refused at once for them both; and yet it had seemed hard to do it, when his father and mother had made the present secrecy of the engagement the condition of their ultimate consent. How was he to get through the next week or two? How was he to keep up

the double deception, when he could not endure to hear Adair speak of the woman who was to be his wife?—when, though he felt he had hurt his cousin by his abruptness, he had not dared, he was bitterly conscious, to ask her pardon, lest he might be betrayed into saying too much? Surely, when it was irrevocable, he would be able to make up his mind to the lot he had prepared for himself,—but if till then he could but be spared this Tantalus torment!

CHAPTER XI.

THE house was very still, with that deepened hush which a summer Sunday afternoon seems to bring to the quietest spot. The only sound was the distant voice of Mirren, somewhere in the back premises, chanting

“ By turns
The psalms of David and the songs of Burns.”

To be betrayed into the latter on the Sabbath-day was a shock to all the sensibilities of the Rule Water, and as Adair stood at the open hall-door, she was amused by the conscience-stricken pause which would follow a few notes of “Ye Banks and Braes o’ Bonnie Doon,” and the increased vigour with which “French” or “Martyrs” would be taken up in its place.

Mrs Earlstoun was dozing by the drawing-

room window, with a book of "Meditations" open on her lap; of Agnes or Elfie there was no sign, so Adair betook herself to the water-side, and to her own meditations, which were not a little perplexing. For once she was left to those undisturbed, as it was late afternoon before she heard Elfie's voice calling her, and presently she appeared through the trees, a flush on her pale cheeks, an unwonted brightness in her eyes. Dallas followed her.

"I knew we should find you here," said Elfie, dropping on to the grass beside Adair, and falling into her usual position, half leaning against her sister's shoulder. Adair's face brightened.

"Give an account of yourselves, good people," she said. "Here I toil home a weary pilgrim, after doing my share of the family devotions, only to find the house deserted. Where have you been?"

"Virtue its own reward is rather unsubstantial, is it not, especially after such a penance?" said Dallas. "I have been more

fortunate. Miss Elfie has taken me to the top of the Camp, and I do not wonder that you find it inspiring."

"In this heat!" ejaculated Adair involuntarily, looking anxiously at Elfie.

Dallas looked conscience-stricken. "Really it was very inconsiderate. I am afraid it has been a clear case of Satan finding some mischief still for idle feet, if not hands, to do, as we used to be taught in our nursery days. He must have plenty to do on Sunday afternoons, I should think. Miss Elfie took pity on my forlorn condition,—certainly we did not mean to go so far. Do you think it has been too much for your sister?"

"Indeed, Adair, I am not a bit tired," said Elfie, with unusual animation; "the air was so fresh, and we had such a lovely view. It is so long since I have been there, I think I had forgotten it was so fine."

"You take a load off my mind, Miss Elfie; I was beginning to realise what the sensations of a criminal might be. Will penitence procure absolution, Miss Adair, seeing it is a first

offence? You won't bind me down though, I hope, never to do so again?"

Adair laughed. "Elfie has never been very strong," she said apologetically; "and really it seemed such a hot endless walk up from the Water-foot to-day, that to think of climbing the Camp makes one feel positively faint. I know I have found doing nothing quite enough for me. You should see the sunset from there, over all that sea of hills."

"Civilisation and dinner, alas! forbid, or I think we should have been tempted to wait for it. Miss Elfie has been showing me the Eildon Hills, and telling me how King Arthur is sleeping under them till some one comes with courage enough to wind his horn and wield his sword, and singing me Border ballads till I think I must go in for a study of the subject."

"It was not wrong, was it, Adair?" asked Elfie. "Mr Dallas said it wasn't, and I thought up there no one could mind."

"My character is in your hands, Miss Adair; I beseech you don't blast it in Miss

Elfie's eyes. I forgot I was in Scotland, but I should not consider you a very rigid Sabatarian. As a set-off, as the lawyers say, I got Miss Elfie to sing me that psalm which was so ill-treated in the church to-day. I never heard it before,—not as you sing it, I mean,—and it certainly had a new meaning up yonder. For myself, I could imagine no better help or soothing than those great spaces of sky and rolling hills that we sat amongst to-day."

"Do you feel that too?" said Adair eagerly. "The Camp is my city of refuge, where I escape for my life periodically—or for my temper, I am afraid it is rather, to be quite honest," smiling. "People who live in the country ought to be better, although I doubt they are not, than those who live in town. I sometimes wonder what I should be if I were always shut up among houses, without the chance of a rush over the hills to act as a sort of safety-valve."

"Yes," said Dallas, with that sudden gravity into which his voice would some-

times fall in the midst of careless talk; "that is what makes the burden of town life. You have no escape from your worry or trouble; you must carry it about among thousands of men and women as harassed as yourself, or cruelly indifferent and at their ease—to outward appearance, at least. I am not speaking of myself, though, but of the poor wretches on whom the weight of life falls."

So the talk drifted away from Border song and story, its pathos and its reckless daring, and "old unhappy far-off things," to that under world that goes its own way beneath the smooth upper current of modern Christianity and civilisation. In those depths some brave souls are for ever toiling, helped, or perhaps hindered, by some sudden spasmodic influx of fashionable philanthropy, when it chances to be stirred by a louder echo of that cry which, like that from the Cities of the Plain of old, is for ever ascending up to heaven, to bring down whether judgment or deliverance, God only knows. In answer to some question of Adair's, Dallas began to

tell something of those workers and their doings, of his own plans, and of that unleavened mass of misery the existence of which, unless when forced upon us, we are all generally willing enough to forget. What Dallas told, what he *could* tell of his own experiences to such listeners, was, of course, nowadays but commonplace, from which no sensation can any longer be extracted. When told, however, with all the vividness of a sensitive artistic temperament, under green boughs and amid rustling leaves and whispering waters, and all the myriad sounds that underlie the sweet summer silence, it had much the same effect upon the two girls as if in some sunny Florentine vineyard Dante had unfolded to a group of his countrywomen the flaming horrors of his *Inferno*. Elfie sat with dilated eyes watching the dark kindling face. Probably she was thinking more of the speaker than of what he was saying, but to her he seemed the very embodiment of the visionary redresser of wrongs, the strong-handed, pure-hearted hero of the floating mass of legend and song in which she

delighted. Adair rose at last with a sigh, brought back to the present by hearing her mother's voice somewhat peevishly calling her name.

"Oh, dear me, I feel as if I had no right to have all this air to breathe after hearing such things," she said, as they went up the narrow garden path. "At least, no one need say there is nothing to do in the world. What if I come some day, Mr Dallas, and ask you to set me to work?" smiling back at him. A sudden light flashed into Dallas's eyes, but Adair had already turned away.

In the evening Agnes returned from Earls-hope beaming and triumphant. She had had *such* a pleasant day, every one had been so kind: even Uncle Alex, who never noticed anybody, had patted her on the shoulder, and told her she had grown a bonnie lassie. "Yes," impressively, "that was exactly what he said; and Lord Lorrimore said, in that funny old-fashioned way of his, 'a mountain daisy.' So there are two fine compliments. But, Adair, wonders will never cease, for when Douglas did

not turn up at lunch, Aunt Evelyn said quite graciously that she supposed he would be here. I quite expected her to be annoyed about it."

"Aunt Evelyn is far too much *grande dame* to show annoyance or any other feeling, for that matter of it; but in this case she might have been quite at ease, as Douglas did not happen to be here."

"Why, where was he then?"

"How should I know? Am I my cousin's keeper?"

"Oh, well, it does not matter, for I have something very much more important to tell you. They are all coming across to-morrow afternoon for 'Tea and Tombs,' as you call it, Adair. It is horribly inconsiderate to come down upon us in that fashion—and on a Monday, too, of all days. I wonder if it ever occurs to Isabel that Muirshiels is ten miles off, and cakes don't grow on bushes. If it were only she who was coming, it would serve her right to have nothing but bread-and-butter."

“Or Nanny Scott’s seedy biscuits from the Water-foot,” suggested Adair.

“Isabel asked me to stay dinner, but of course I was not dressed, and I just let her see that I thought it rather too much to expect me to come here and dress and go back again. Then she said in that insufferable way of hers, ‘My dear child, no one will ever notice what you have on; but if you are very anxious to change your dress, I think one of Clara’s frocks would do quite well.’ Clara’s frocks indeed!” with a superb toss of the elaborate little head. “I think I would give ten years of my existence only to be in a position to snub Isabel satisfactorily *once*—only once. I should feel I had not lived in vain.”

“You couldn’t, Aggie; no human being could. I would set my ambition on possibilities,” laughed Adair.

“The only thing that reconciles me to their coming to-morrow is that Tuesday is the twelfth, and good-bye to the men after that. We should have to take all the same trouble for old Lord Lorrimore, and a dreadful man

who gobbled so and never opened his mouth—to speak at least, I mean. Oh, I do hope it may be fine to-morrow. It would be too bad if it should rain after the good weather has lasted so long.

“It would save us a lot of trouble if it rained,” said Adair, rather ruefully, mentally marshalling her resources. “I am afraid I shall have to ‘break the Sabbath,’ and begin operations at once.”

Adjoining the garden was a very old burying-ground, like it sloping down to the Rule, whose clear waters, gliding by the low broken wall and those long-forsaken graves, seemed to murmur a ceaseless requiem for the forgotten dead. The church, which had long ago been removed farther down the glen, was said to have been built upon the ruins of an ancient chapel; but nothing now remained of either save a shapeless heap of stones, over which the brambles trailed their many-tinted sprays. All that was left now was a square enclosure of green turf, with a few grey slanting headstones, or a stray

“table-stone”—a heavy slab supported on four squat pillars, and all powdered over with orange lichen. The old graveyard, which as a rule was visited only by some stray sheep, which had discovered that the old turf was juicier pasture than the hill-grass, presented a very unusual sight that afternoon. For once the weather had not behaved with the contrariety of weather in general, and of Scotch weather in particular; and most of Mrs Earlstoun’s guests were scattered about in groups, each “doing the tombs” in his or her fashion. Mr Earlstoun and Lord Lorrimore were both upon their knees beside a half-sunken stone, vigorously clearing away the long grass from about it, and hotly disputing as to the half-obliterated inscription. Lady Hermione was languidly poking the moss with her parasol from off a grinning skull, the emblem carved on most of the stones, and remarking that it was “very funny”; while the others wandered about reading such epitaphs as were still decipherable, and laughing over their quaintness. After a while Adair sat down a little apart

from the others on one of the flat table-stones. She was feeling utterly depressed and out of spirits, partly perhaps because she was over-tired. Though afternoon tea may be the easiest form of entertainment when the materials are within ordinary reach, the conditions are somewhat altered when in a remote country place every dainty has to be constructed *ab ovo*. The striking of a light is an affair of charming simplicity, provided one has a patent safety match-box at hand; but the same operation becomes one of doubt and difficulty if it has to be toiled for with a flint and tinder-box. The preparations for her simple feast had cost her a hard morning's work. At breakfast Agnes had announced that she would arrange the flowers and the table, in the tone of one making a generous offer, and from whom nothing more could reasonably be expected; while Mirren's zeal without knowledge had nearly produced a catastrophe more than once.

As Adair sat apart she was oppressed with the utter incongruity of the sight,—the bril-

liant August sunshine, the bright dresses, the gay talk and laughter, amid those grim relics of mortality. Had they no pity or reverence for the poor forgotten dust, that had once been men and women, as strong in limb, as high in hope, as full of life as they? Was there no appeal to them in those rudely carved words, the last effort of love and sorrow long laid to rest too, to preserve a name and a place for its beloved dead in the world of living men?

"I say, Lady Hermione, come and look at this old fellow; here's the jolliest one I've unearthed yet," cried Lord Romer, sweeping aside the nettles with his stick from a tombstone near.

"Did you think we needed a *memento mori*, Adair," said Douglas, coming up to her, "that you brought us all here?"

"If I did, I have altogether failed then, for the effect is evidently anything but solemnising. No; the idea was Isabel's, not mine. If people have served their day and generation, I think they have done enough; it certainly would not have occurred to me to get an

afternoon's amusement out of them when they were dead and gone."

"Trust Isabel for making the most out of everything or every one. She has a fine practical turn of mind, unhampered by any useless sentiment. She always reminds me of the worthy lady in 'Ingoldsby,' is it? who, when her lamented husband is taken out of the pond with his pockets full of eels, suggests—

'Go, pop Sir Thomas again in the pond;
Poor dear! he'll catch us some more.'

"What a truly brotherly criticism!" said Adair, laughing, in spite of all her good resolves of the day before as to maintaining a cooler and more distant demeanour towards her cousin. "What would she say if she heard you?"—looking at Isabel sitting serene and smiling under the becoming shade of a rose-lined parasol.

"She would regard it as rather a compliment to her common-sense, I think. It would not hurt him, and some more eels would be

extremely useful, don't you see?" Douglas laughed, but neither the tone nor the laugh was like his ordinary good-humoured jesting manner. They awakened the dull vague pain, the sense of some indefinable change, that Adair had felt more than once since his return. She sat silent; and Douglas began idly scraping the green mould off the stone on which they were sitting. By-and-by he spelt out, "Also their son Gabriel Scott, who departed this life Sep. ye 21st, 1680, *ætat.* 27." "A year older than I am, poor chap. I suppose he would be as desperately taken up with his own concerns two hundred years ago as we all are just now. I wonder if he was sorry to leave this world, or if he had made a mess of his existence, and wasn't very unwilling to be done with it? Pretty much the same to him now, I fancy."

"What are you studying, Earlstoun? I thought you left archæology to dear papa," said Lord Romer, coming up. Lady Hermione was all very well to look at, but a man wanted a change occasionally, and there

was no reason why Earlstoun should have the monopoly of the best-looking girl of the lot, even though she were his cousin. He would probably be renewing his flirtation with Miss Cicely by-and-by, so he, Lord Romer, might as well begin to qualify for the vacant position, thought the ingenuous youth. "I hope we have not been kicking our heels over any of your respected ancestors, Earlstoun?" he said, sitting down. "I should be sorry to hurt any one's family feelings."

"No; I don't think my respected ancestors were particular about Christian burial. They were put under pretty much wherever they might chance to get knocked on the head. After the race got civilised and settled down, they set up a vault at Melrose."

"After all, those old chaps must have been rather a set of ruffians, though it is the fashion to look on them as heroes," said Lord Romer complacently. His lordship's father had been a highly successful manufacturer; his grandfather, so far as his existence could be held proved, a weaver.

“Very likely,” said Douglas coolly; “still, there is something to be said in favour of those good old days, when

‘Tooming a fauld, or sweeping of a glen,
Had still been held the deeds of gallant men.’

There was a fine simplicity about it, at any rate. You risked your life to take your neighbour’s goods, and he did the same to you in return. On the whole, I’d rather have tried my hand at it than more modern ways of money-raising.”

“I need not appeal to you, Miss Adair—women are always conservative: you will be all for the good old times and the Border ruffians too.”

“I don’t admire the mills at Muirshiels, certainly, and it is decidedly distressing to see the Rule all blue and red with the dye from them; but, on the whole, one must admit, I suppose, that it is better than when the ‘wan water’ ran red with blood, as in the ballads. One’s appreciation of that would depend very much upon whose blood it might be,” said Adair, laughing.

“Adair, you shock me; but I suppose you cannot be expected to appreciate the feelings of a man and an angler,” said Douglas.

“Who is that?” exclaimed Adair involuntarily, as her mother, accompanied by Mrs Earlstoun and two ladies, came through the gate which led into the garden. One was little, very pretty in a dark vivacious style, and dressed in the exaggeration of fashion; the other, who looked tall beside her companion, was singularly slight and graceful. She was very dark, but not in her friend’s sparkling style: her face was almost sallow, the mouth rather noticeably wide, with thin lips. But it was her eyes that attracted Adair: to her it seemed as if the stranger had at once fixed them upon her. They were a light-yellowish grey, the pupils were very large, and a dark ring surrounded the iris. The effect of those light eyes in the dark face Adair was inclined to think curious, and not wholly agreeable; indeed her first opinion of the new-comer would probably

have been that she was decidedly plain, in spite of the grace of her figure and the easy perfection of her walk and carriage, by no means a common gift. She wore black, which made her a striking figure amid so many white or bright-coloured dresses, with a mass of vivid scarlet poppies at her throat and in the broad black hat so picturesquely worn. Picturesque she certainly was. Though there was nothing unusual about her dress, it was worn somehow with a different air and style; and though the group round her included stately Mrs Earlstoun and her pretty companion, they seemed to fall into the background and become mere accessories to the slight dark figure.

Lord Romer turned round with an expression like a frozen whistle on his face. "The fair Cis in the flesh! I didn't know you expected her so soon, Earlstoun."

"It is Miss Charteris, I suppose?" asked Adair, turning to her cousin.

"Yes, and Lady Warriston; I have no doubt you can easily decide which is which,"

replied Douglas. He was sitting in the shadow which was now lengthening, but had Adair been less occupied with the newcomers she might have noticed that his face had paled under its sunburn, while the softer blue light had died out of his eyes. It really seemed to do so under the influence of trouble or pain or anger, which, like a thickening cloud spreading its cold veil over the summer sky, left them only grey.

Adair rose to relieve her mother, and to propose an adjournment for tea.

“My gracious! what are all you good people doing, spending your afternoon in a grave-yard?” Lady Warriston was saying. “I guess I’d rather keep away from one as far as I knew, till I’d got to go under. Folks say you English take your pleasures sadly, but I don’t see the joke of this.” Lady Warriston was a San Francisco belle, and had captivated her lord, a seeker after big game, who had come down to the Golden City after a fruitless attempt to stalk wild

sheep among the Rockies. She prided herself now on preserving the diction and manners of the Pacific slope in all their unconventional simplicity. "I'm ready, you bet," she said, in answer to Adair's suggestion of tea. "I'm mighty sharp set, I can tell you, after that drive; and so is Cis, I'm sure, but catch her saying so."

"I wish I could induce you to spend the evening at Earlshope, Lady Warriston," said Mrs Earlstoun.

"Can't, thank you, ma'am. I shouldn't have been here at all to-day, for I've more to do than I can look at just now; but after to-morrow, when the men go off killing those poor harmless birds, we'll get a rest from them. I tell Cis it's mighty good-natured of me to let her go, but that it's more good-natured of you to have her. I wouldn't, I can tell you, if I had a grown-up son. She should be labelled dangerous; but little Jack is only three years old, so I can keep my mind easy for some time yet. *He* is not to

follow his father's example, if I know it," with a laugh.

"What have I done that you should give me such a character, Lady Warriston? What will Mrs Earlstoun think of me?" said Miss Charteris, smiling. Her voice was singularly round and melodious—hardly the voice which one would have expected from those thin lips and such a slight physique. She pronounced her words with perhaps a trifle more exactness than is usual, which gave all she said a certain significance compared with the clipping haste of modern speech.

"Oh, it's not your fault, my dear—you can't help it," laughed Lady Warriston.

"'As you are strong, be merciful,' Miss Charteris," said Douglas, who had come up in time to hear Lady Warriston's last speech.

"If I can, Mr Earlstoun," with a smile, and holding out a long black-gloved hand; "but you hear what Lady Warriston says."

“Now, my dear girl, I’m on for that tea you were speaking of,” said Lady Warriston, tapping Adair briskly on the arm. “I must positively gobble and go, for they can’t run the show without me over yonder.”

CHAPTER XII.

TEA under the mossy, gnarled, old orchard trees was a very merry affair. No one could be accused of taking pleasure sadly, save perhaps Lord Lorrimore, who, having found the gravestones not so ancient as he had expected, apparently felt he had been decoyed there on false pretences. Sir Andrew had also been somewhat out of his element during the afternoon, as stones, save as geological specimens, were of no interest to him, and his researches into past ages only began where history ceased. He had therefore that fine intolerance for his neighbours' pursuits only to be found in its perfection in those who are themselves wholly absorbed in one single study. No party, however, which included Lady Warriston and Lady Lorrimore could be a silent one, and

the voice of the Rule was overpowered by the flow of talk and laughter, and the pleasant little clink and jingle of silver and china. Through the scanty grey-green leaves above, lazily flickering against the hot blue, long shafts of sleepy afternoon sunshine stole through, touching Miss Charteris's poppies to a keener scarlet, striking a warmer tint from Adair's ruddy coils, and enveloping Elfie, who loved the sunshine, in a halo of misty gold. Since she could not be beside Adair, she had drawn a little apart, half scared by the gay little tumult; and, sitting alone in the broad stream of sunlight, she seemed wrapped round in an atmosphere of her own. Dallas, thinking the girl looked lost and lonely, came and sat down beside her, possibly from a somewhat similar reason, that Adair was so much occupied by ceaseless demands for cups of tea that she could not pay much heed to any one. Lady Warriston was amply justifying her very frank statements as to the condition of her appetite, and was making a hearty meal in a most business-like fashion. "Yes, you may

bring me another cake," she was saying, with her mouth half full; "it ain't that I want it now, you know, but when anything so elegant comes in my way you don't find me saying, I pass. Tell the young lady she's to come over and tell me where she gets them or how they're made, for my old cook doesn't seem to have an idea in her head."

Mirren, who was moving about breathing heavily, and somewhat vaguely brandishing a plate of cakes at intervals, as if it were a wave-offering, gazed at her and Lady Lorri-more with round-eyed wonder.

"Losh keep us! they twa weemen chattered like twa pyots" (magpies), she remarked afterwards. "I didna think leddies wad hae cairried on in that way. If it werena for the braw goons, there wadna be muckle to ferlie at aboot them. Deed nane o' them could haud the caunle to the Miss." The damsel's first introduction to polite society had evidently not been wholly unattended by that disenchantment which lurks in every fulfilled dream.

Lord Romer seemed to share Mirren's opinion, for on the first opportunity he planted himself by Adair, saying, "Don't you think I deserve a cup of tea now? I am sure I have been working like a black fellow, or a galley-slave, or anything else you please. It is your turn and mine now. Oh, don't bother about them any more," as Adair glanced round at her guests; "they must be all 'pretty full' now, as Lady Warriston says she is. All I know is, if she isn't she ought to be, for I am certain I have brought her cakes sixteen times at least."

"You had better add, 'This is a fact,' as Lady Warriston's compatriots would do after some specially tall story. I am willing to accept six if you insist upon it, but the age of blind faith is over, and sixteen times is beyond my credulity," laughed Adair. She was not above a little human satisfaction in the success of her housewifely efforts: possibly there was also a secret unconscious relief in discovering that Miss Charteris, however striking, was not, after all, particularly handsome.

Adair in her ignorance was as yet inclined to rate beauty higher than the subtler and often more powerful fascination that a woman may possess apart from it. Douglas at least did not seem specially interested in her, for after gallantly supplementing Mirren's somewhat ineffectual efforts, he had subsided on to the grass beside Lady Hermione, who was at intervals exchanging a languid remark with him. Not that either of those considerations took actual shape in Adair's mind, but no doubt they had some share in her sudden access of good spirits, which she herself would have attributed solely to the success of the afternoon.

"And what do you think of the fair Cis?" asked Lord Romer, after an interval devoted to refreshment after his labours.

Adair looked towards Miss Charteris, who was leaning with a sort of lazy grace against one of the old trees, a little knot of men round her.

"She is very striking and unusual looking," said Adair with a little hesitation. "But why

do you call her *fair*?—it seems to me rather inappropriate, unless,” with a laugh, “it is in the same sort of way that one talks of the fair Helen or the fair Rosamond, a tribute to her all-conquering powers of which Lady Warriston speaks.

“Perhaps,” said Lord Romer, evidently in considerable doubt as to who those apparently well-known ladies might be. “Fair or not, she has been a tremendous rage in town; half the fellows were raving about her. Earlstoun was wild about her, like every one else. I don’t know whether he has got over it, or whether he is on his good behaviour before papa and mamma. I was rather amazed to hear she was coming here: it almost looks as if there were something on, doesn’t it?”

“Are you counting on good bags to-morrow?” Adair inquired frigidly. Gossip, especially ill-natured gossip, was hateful, but in a man it was despicable. Douglas’s affairs were no concern of hers, with that little haughty lifting of the chin; at least she would not discuss them with this tiresome little man.

“Eh? oh, I suppose so,” said Lord Romer, confused by the sudden change of subject, and with a dim sense of having been snubbed. “Rather little heather—at least you have to drive a good bit to get to it. Now my idea of a shooting is one where you can just step out of the door and begin to blaze away.” If Lord Romer had expected to improve his position by a sly hit at his rival, he must have been somewhat disappointed. Still, like most modern youth, he had fully mastered that cheerful philosophy—

“If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?”

A peer of the realm nowadays is not accustomed to tax his brains to entertain an indifferent damsel, nor to have the honour of even his passing notice disregarded. If Adair did not appreciate the favour bestowed on her, there were always others who would. Agnes came up to make some suggestion, and presently she and Lord Romer were in the full tide of a bantering argument as to something he had said or done which he ought not to

have said or done, or *vice versâ*, on the previous afternoon. She had her reward, as before the afternoon was over Lord Romer mentally pronounced her "a jolly little thing, with far more go in her than the other," sapiently adding, "That is the worst of your good-looking girls,—they put far too high a figure on themselves."

"So you've got George Dallas here!" said Lady Warriston, finally resigning her tea-cup to Sir Claud. "Thought he had joined a guild or a brotherhood, or whatever you call it. I han't seen him nohow or nowhere for ages. This fuss about the poor makes me right mad, and the way nice men are fooling round with them. There ain't room for every one of you in this bit of an island, to be sure; you should pack them out West—I guess there's room enough there. Who is that odd-looking girl with him?"

"That," said Isabel, looking round; "oh, that is a little cousin of mine."

Lady Warriston laughed. "I guess I've got to lay low after such a speech, but how

was I to know? Relations ought to resemble each other, really."

"She is rather unusual looking," said Isabel placidly, "but not nearly so much so as when she was younger. She was so very tall and thin that Douglas used to call her 'a reed shaken with the wind,' — wasn't that it, Douglas?"

"How should I know?" said Douglas, thus suddenly appealed to. "I have no doubt I was a very unpleasant, not to say a profane, little animal in those days. That is the drawback to the family relation, Lady Warriston, — the inconveniently good memories one's brothers and sisters are sure to have; or even if you have the good luck to be an only child, you are certain to have some aunt or elderly female relative who covers you with confusion by her artless tales of your infancy. Such a dear little boy you were, to be sure, in petticoats, with a distinct suggestion that you are far from having fulfilled the promise of your youth."

"Just as well for me that my dear friends

are pretty far across the other side," laughed Lady Warriston, "or they'd have some lively tales to tell."

"Get Adair to ask Elfie to sing something, Douglas. Her singing is not so remarkable as her playing, but I am sure Lady Warriston would like to hear a Scotch song. I think they always sound best in the open air, and unaccompanied. I wonder Adair did not think of it herself."

"Oh, poor child, she would be frightened to death. It is a pity to bother her, is it not?" said Douglas lazily.

"Nonsense; it is time she was getting over that nervousness. I think you are more unwilling to bother yourself than Elfie."

"I do not know how you keep up such an amount of energy in this weather, Isabel," said Douglas, rising.

"Quite right, Miss Earlstoun—keep them going," said Lady Warriston; "your men over here are awfully selfish and lazy. Our men could walk round them in the way of manners any day, though you don't believe

that. I just stared at first, I can tell you, at the things they left me to do for myself. My old man was rather far on, when I got him, to learn much, but he has spryed up wonderful, and no mistake."

Miss Charteris's eyes followed Douglas as he crossed the little stretch of sun-flecked grass, the pupils and the dark surrounding ring seeming to dilate till the light-coloured iris had all but disappeared.

Adair looked a little doubtful on receiving Isabel's message. "Elfie does not care for singing unless when she is alone; she does not forget herself in it as she does when she is at the organ. I almost wish Isabel had not spoken of it."

"Never mind, then; don't worry the child for that chattering woman's sake. Dallas and she have quite become chums, have they not? I knew he would be taken with those odd little simple ways of hers. If it were any one but Elfie, I should be inclined to think that Humanity had found a rival," said Douglas, with a smile.

Adair started. "What do you mean?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, nothing—don't look so serious. It was a very idiotic speech. Elfie is such a child yet, it is only natural to pet her a bit. Dallas regards the world from an artistic standpoint, when he is not fathoms deep in philanthropy. Probably he would tell you that she harmonises with the scenery, or embodies the spirit of the district, or some jargon of that sort."

Adair looked rather uneasily at her sister. Her eyes were wide and bright, and were fixed intently on Dallas's face, who, half sitting, half reclining on the grass beside her, his head propped on his hand, was looking smilingly up at her. For the moment they seemed entirely absorbed in each other. A shadow fell on the girl's face when Adair came up with Isabel's request,—a look of positive fear clouded her eyes. "I can't sing; I wish people would not ask me," she said hurriedly.

"Cannot sing? How am I to believe that after yesterday, Elfie?" The formal prefix

had been unconsciously dropped, it seemed unnatural to address her by it. Both of the girls noticed it, each with her own private little thrill of interpretation.

"That was quite different. I was singing for you," Elfie said simply.

"Then won't you sing for me again?" with a smile. "Only think that we are up on the Camp, you and I, with the hills all round us, and those people miles away down in the glens, except your sister—we shall allow her to be present," with a laughing glance at Adair, who had sat down beside Elfie.

"What shall I sing?" asked Elfie, like a child.

"That strange weird one, I cannot remember the name, but up in the sunlight yonder it seemed to bring the whole scene before me—the misty dawn, and the dead knight, and the nameless mourner, even the broken cross, and the last few quivering leaves on the aspen. If I could paint it as I can see it, I could imagine it a fine picture."

Isabel was right in saying that Elfie's singing was by no means to be compared with her

playing, but in its way it was remarkable enough. Her voice was rather a deep contralto, all the more striking from the contrast between its fulness and power, and the little pale face and slight figure of the singer. But the impressiveness of her singing seemed to lie in her own vivid realisation of her song, which, as Dallas said, set it like a picture before her hearers. When she had finished her strange gloomy ballad, there was an entreaty for another, and she sang Mary's pathetic lament over the dead Douglas—a modern imitation of the old ballad, of which the touching refrain, "Douglas, Douglas, tender and true," may be a genuine fragment. That refrain would haunt the memory of more than one hearer for many a day.

"That's a very pretty compliment to you, Earlstoun; endeavour to deserve it, my dear boy," called out Lord Romer, amid a general laugh, to Douglas, who was standing behind Adair. Poor Elfie looked confused. "Should I not have sung it? I never thought," she said falteringly.

“Your little cousin is a very wonderful singer, Miss Earlstoun,” said Miss Charteris, who had gazed with the same singular intentness at Elfie as at the little group round her.

“Yes,” said Isabel, with her complacent appropriating manner; “but you must hear her play—that is something really remarkable.”

“Well, her singing is quite remarkable enough for me, I reckon,” said Lady Warriston. “It is very fine, I suppose, but it’s about as cheerful as the churchyard where you were all disporting yourselves a little while ago. My taste don’t run in the direction of the doleful. I must be off, though, if the buggy’s here. Perhaps some one will go and see. Good-bye, Cis; don’t do more harm than you can help.” With a volley of nods and smiles and parting messages, Lady Warriston went towards the gate, where, along with the Earlschope carriages, the very high smart phaeton she chose to call the buggy was waiting. There was a general bustle of departure, a little debate as to who should drive and who should walk by the short cut across the bridge,

most of the younger members of the party deciding on the latter. "It has really been quite a nice little afternoon, Aunt Agnes," said Isabel, amid the chorus of good-byes. "You have managed very well indeed, Adair—very creditably, I am sure; but another time I wouldn't have that girl stamping and staring about. Of course she may tone down by-and-by, but she is rather suggestive of the byre as yet. And you will not forget to write out that recipe for Lady Warriston?—she is quite in earnest about it. Funny, isn't it? I thought asking for recipes had gone out with our grandmothers and key-baskets and side-pockets. Quite likely she messed away cooking and baking in the backwoods, or wherever Lord Warriston picked her up; but of course, to be American covers a multitude of sins nowadays."

"'One woe is past'!" exclaimed Adair, throwing herself down on the grass under the thorn-tree as soon as the garden-gate had closed. "I feel as if I did not wish to see the face of my kind for some time to come. I shall go and

gather up the fragments directly, but I must have five minutes' peace first."

"You would be a perfect misanthrope, Adair, if you were allowed your own way," said Agnes, following her example. "Now I was just going to say that since the afternoon has gone off so well, we ought to have another soon. I think I know *some one* at least who would not be unwilling to come," with a conscious little laugh. "For my part, I do not grudge the time and trouble it has cost in the least."

"No, perhaps *you* don't," said Adair, rather dryly.

"This is really very pretty," said Miss Charteris, pausing on the bridge, as every one instinctively did. "What do you call the stream, Mr Earlstoun?" turning to Douglas, who was at a little distance from her.

"The Rule," he said, coming up and standing beside her.

"To be sure; I might have remembered. We crossed it farther down, of course. What

a charming set scene it would make. I am all the more inclined to look at it from the stage point of view from the little comedy we have been enacting this afternoon," with a low liquid laugh. "Really I feel quite inspired by the situation; it promises to keep my powers, such as they are, in practice. It is not at all a bad idea, though—I think I shall suggest it to Vane. He would make a good thing out of it, and I would require no rehearsal to play the part of the heroine on approbation, as the shopmen say, or on sufferance, or what would you call it?"

"It is not by my wish at least, Cicely," said Douglas gravely, shading his eyes a little from the level sun-rays. The sun was dipping towards the hills, going down in intolerable burning splendour. Between the two long lines of drooping birch and dark-green alder that clothed its banks the Rule ran living fire. The evening hush was deepening; from the woods came a little, contented, restful chirrup now and then; other sound there was none. One by one the rest of the party had dropped

away ; it was an ideal hour and place for the meeting of reunited lovers.

“Are they so very angry at poor me? I suppose it was only to be expected ; but you, at least, ought to be delighted to have me here, by fair means or foul ; and do you know, sir, you have never even told me you were glad to see me.” Miss Charteris was leaning on the rail ; she turned and looked at him over her shoulder with a smile. To his shame, Douglas was conscious of a momentary shiver of something like absolute aversion. How well he knew that look and motion—the slight turn of the long supple neck ; the smile that slowly curved the lips ; the light gradually spreading over the expressive face, till those wonderful eyes kindled in a sudden flash. The glancing water, the whispering trees, the serene evening sky vanished : he was standing beside her again on the staircase of a great London house, leaning on the balustrade ; beneath them, instead of the rippling, flame-dyed water, was a great bank of exotics, their heavy enervating odours stealing upwards. She had worn black

then, as she was doing now ; her long slender arms were bare to the shoulder, and clasped high up in classic fashion with heavy bands of gold. He had followed her there from the theatre, still under the glamour of her strange power, in a sort of mental giddiness. For the moment they were alone. She had turned and looked at him with that slow smile, that flashing dilation of the eyes, and the hasty impulsive words had leaped from his lips—words that, though he refused to acknowledge it, had been repented soon enough after they were uttered. How mad, how fatal a mistake he had made, he had realised only too bitterly the first time he had looked again upon Adair's face. His brief infatuation had fallen dead, and now he was conscious only of a sort of amazed wonder that it could ever have had such power over him. It had been like the waft of heavy cloying perfume from that mass of tropic bloom drooping in the heated air, compared with the breath of his own hill-sides and glen, fresh and bracing with the sweet natural fragrance of birch and gale and

heather. Whatever fascination Cicely Charteris had had for him, it had never been over his better self. After his long absence and months of monotonous service in an out-of-the-way station, it was perhaps no wonder that it had not been very difficult to persuade him to remain in London. They would all be going to Earlshope soon enough, Mrs Earlstoun had said, smiling at his impatience; why could he not wait till then? Of course it was natural and reasonable enough that his father and mother should wish him to do so; and while he chafed at one delay after another, he soon plunged with quickened zest into all the pleasures of young men like himself, to which he had been so long a stranger. Grosser temptations had no special charm for him. Fortunately for him, the Daylesford strain in his blood was tempered by a stronger infusion from the sturdy old Border stock; still, the pleasure-loving appetites, the lower nature, had got the reins for the time, and it was these that had sunk enslaved under Cicely's spell. Douglas was not given to in-

trospection, or to any speculations on the dual nature, but he had grown tired and disgusted with himself and his surroundings, sick of what he had thought amusement, long before he had left town. At the sight of the familiar hills, of the old home, more than all in the light of Adair's eyes, he had seemed to wake from some dull weary dream, and to be himself once more. But, like the strong man of old, many a man wakens from his dream thinking he has but to rise and shake himself free to walk at liberty again, only to find himself bound fast, hand and foot, with bonds he cannot sever. The past was not past ; the dream was over indeed, but the hard reality remained to be faced. If it was a bitter cup that was commended to his lips now, it had been his own mixing ; he had no right to complain of it, still less to let the woman he had sought for his wife learn under what a pitiful passing impulse he had won her promise. Every one has his ideal virtue, and, like most men, Douglas Earlstoun held truth and honour, though possibly in a somewhat

conventional sense, as above all the rest. Now his very honour, his pledged word, compelled him to untruth unless he were to break his word in the spirit and keep it in the letter, —be guilty of the brutality of letting Cicely see that he had nothing but his hand and his name to offer her. Still the utmost lover-like demonstration to which he could force himself was to lay his hand gently on the slender black-gloved one lying on the rail beside him, while Miss Charteris went on laughingly—

“I confess I thought we were doing rather a risky thing. I was not afraid of myself—it is my *métier*; but I own I had grave doubts as to how you were to sustain your part. You have really surprised me, though; I did not know you had so much dramatic instinct in reserve. That was an awful speech of Lady Warriston’s, was it not? What a woman she is, to be sure. I was devoured with inward laughter when you came up, and we were going through our grave courtesies—Miss Charteris, Mr Earlstoun—and all the rest of it. I think your mother must have felt rather

murderous ; but after all, there is no actress like your regular society woman. How very beautiful she is, Douglas ; you don't in the least take after her," saucily. Then with a sudden change of voice and a little short sigh, "I wonder if she will ever get to like me even the least little bit?"

"She does not make friends easily, Cicely," said Douglas, looking down into the water ; "you must not think her unkind if her manner is a little cold. It becomes a habit, I suppose. I don't think even we, her children, realise what she feels for us,—at least, till lately I know I didn't." The sudden confusing recollection of what had opened his mother's heart to him silenced him.

"Oh, poor woman," said Cicely, lightly, with another of her swift changes of manner ; "it is not to be expected that she should do more than tolerate me—at first, at least. Even Lady Warriston has visions already of the great match little Jack is to make. But I shall give you one piece of advice, Douglas,

invaluable to an amateur, and that is, don't overdo your part. Lord Romer was asking me to-day if you and I had quarrelled, though he thought that hardly likely, seeing I was here."

"He is an infernal little idiot," broke out Douglas, relieved, perhaps, to find some vent for the gnawing irritation within.

"He seems very much taken up with that pretty little doll of a cousin of yours. He began with the elder, I noticed; she's a fine-looking girl for those who like that Rubens flesh-and-blood style. Your little men always gravitate to that ample style of woman, but I suppose she was not responsive, as he transferred his favours. By the by, Douglas, why did you never tell me about those cousins?" with a quick dilation of the eyes fixed on his face.

"How on earth was I to know, Cicely, that a list of my female relatives would be of any interest to you? I shall get out the family-tree when we go home, and you can study them at leisure unto the third and

the fourth generation. You will have plenty of occupation, for it is a genuine Scotch genealogy, taking in cousins forty times removed."

"I am not interested in the tree, or its twigs either, especially such distant ones; but if those cousins have always lived here, as I suppose they have——?"

"Yes."

"I wonder, then, you never chanced to speak of them. The three are such very different types too. The elder—she has an out-of-the-way sort of name, by the by. I did not catch it—Adair, is that it?—is rather the bountiful dairymaid stamp; if she weren't so pale, she might look overblown in a year or two. The second is a pretty little doll, as I said. She has acute little brains under her flaxen wig, though; *elle ira loin*, if only she gets the chance. The third is rather a mystery. I don't know whether your friend, Mr Dallas, regards her as an Undine, with a soul to be awakened. If I were you I'd warn him—it is rather a dangerous amusement: awakened

souls are apt to develop unexpected properties. I don't know how to classify her, really—a dairymaid, a doll——”

“Suppose you leave the child in peace, then. Do you label and assort all your acquaintances in this way? It must form an interesting mental museum, I have no doubt; but if you don't mind, I would rather not have any more of my friends arranged in it as specimens.”

“Why, have I annoyed you, Douglas?” in a tone of innocent wonder. “Of course they are your cousins, but, as a rule, one has to accept so much plain-speaking from relatives that one generally indemnifies one's self by indulging in a little about them in return. What would this world be if we did not abuse each other a little? I have no doubt they are busy picking me to pieces. I can imagine the Doll—I beg your pardon,—Number Two, I don't know her name—saying that such light eyes look queer with a dark complexion, and that my mouth is far too big. All of which is quite true; but”——

with a flashing smile—"some people have admired Cis Charteris in spite of all that. However, I will not offend again. We had better get out the family-tree after all, I think, and you will put a mark against those names which are to be sacred from my irreverent tongue. As you never mentioned your cousins——"

"I never spoke of my cousins," said Douglas, with a sort of desperate calmness, "because I had not seen them for years; and that absence makes the heart grow fonder is a pretty little fallacy, I think. We had plenty else to speak and think about, as far as I can remember."

"Yes, I think we had," laughed Cicely; "that perennial fountain of interest, our noble selves, first and foremost, of course: and having got back to that never-failing topic, do you know, Douglas, I don't think your native air, or 'Home, sweet home,' agrees with you after such a long absence; or perhaps the weight of that very solid charmer, Lady Hermione, or the fatigue of

sustaining your *rôle*, has been too much for you; but you have been looking most dismal all afternoon. Is the parental ban to cover all our intercourse? Are we to be distant acquaintances all through, or may we not relax a little in private life? Are you afraid you will forget your part if you don't keep it in constant rehearsal, or,"—coming a little nearer, and smiling into the troubled grey eyes,—“am I not forgiven yet for my silly speeches?”

Douglas was but a man, and a young man after all, and to such an invitation there could be but one response. But with Cicely Charteris in his arms, her eyes pouring all their dark fires into his, he felt bitterly that he had forfeited the right even to think of Adair. How dare he pollute her image any more, even by his dreams. The bridge, the sunset hour, the very lap and gurgle of the water, had till now had only one association for him—Adair. What pictures rose before him—meetings and partings, her face, her smile, each sweeter and purer than the last;

but now all those fair visions were blurred and confused by this shuddering sense of shame and self-abasement.

A bell rang sharp and clear over the darkening woods, and echoed through the silence of the hills.

“My dear boy, you must let me go,” laughed Miss Charteris. “Dressing must be an affair of deep and serious thought to-night. Think of the eyes that will be on me—and some women have *gimlets* for eyes, I assure you. I must look out my very fullest war-paint and feathers for such an occasion. You have some pride in your little Cis after all, I hope. I think I won’t disappoint you. That was a pretty song of Undine’s, by the by,” she went on, as they turned away from the dying fires of the west. “It is a great pity I have not more voice, it would have been so useful to me in some of my parts, and I would have got her to teach it me.” And Miss Charteris hummed the refrain, “Douglas, Douglas, tender and true.” “Really it was very flattering,” she broke off with a laugh. “As Lord

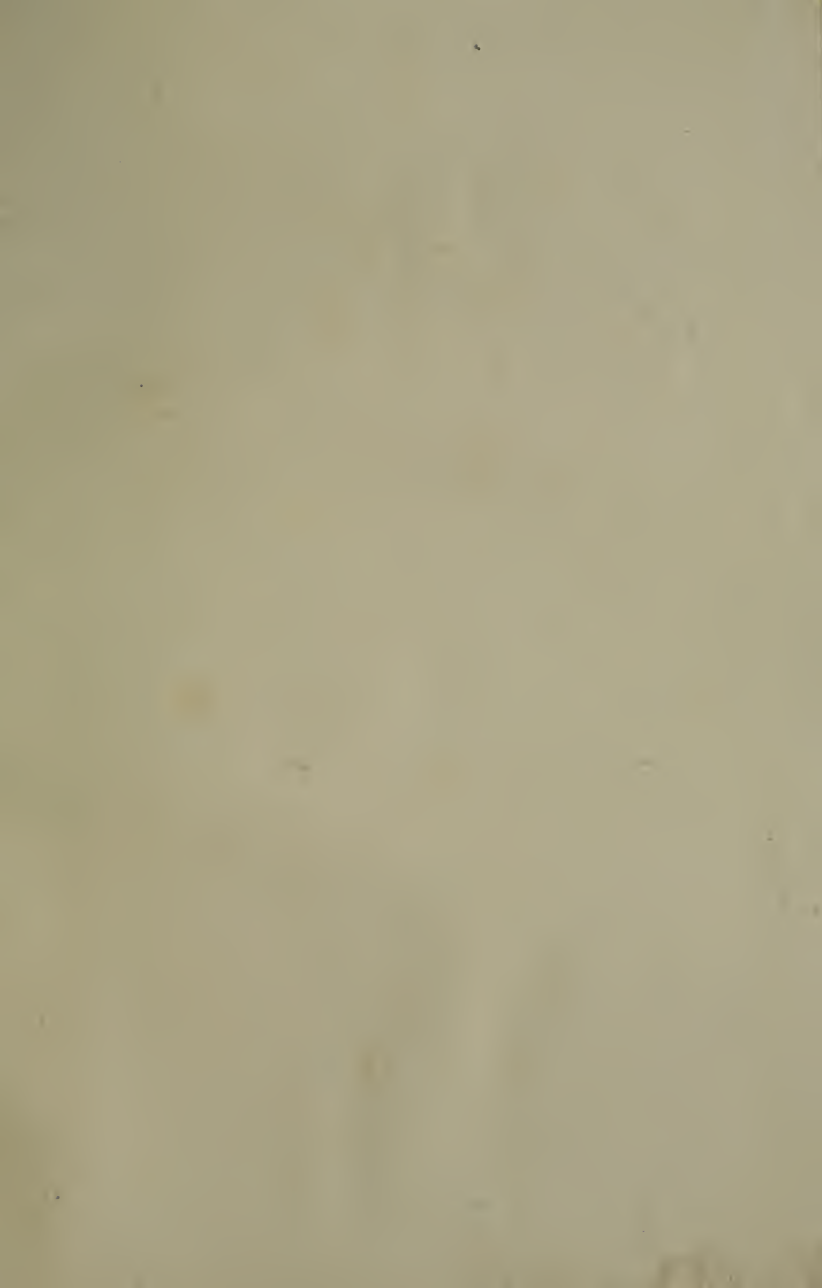
Romer said, I hope you mean to deserve it, Douglas," with an arch smiling glance, and putting her hand on his arm.

It could hardly have been the lingering sunset glow that dyed Douglas's face, and even his neck, so deep and sudden a red, though the crimson light still lay here and there in great pools and splashes amid the trees.

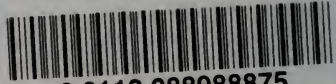
"I will be true at least, Cicely, God helping me," he said in a low suppressed voice, pressing the hand that lay on his arm with unconscious force.

"*Merci bien!* I have not the slightest doubt but what you will, so there is no need of such solemnity. I hope I am not *too* exacting, but"—with a smile—"I think I should like a little tenderness too."

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His cousin Adair /



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